

A Funny Thought on a New Way to Play

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1

I am already playing. And I don't tend to like games. At least I don't like games in which I don't get to participate in inventing or discovering the rules. What I do like, however, is finding games where and when games are said not to be. My desire is to keep playing this game of truth - and you are invited to play along.

Suppose that we are already playing (I, in writing this; you, in reading it) and that in realizing it we come to admit that in some way everything is a game - everything personal, everything social, and everything cultural, anyway, including what seems least playful: work, or struggle, for example.

Suppose again that we go on (or realize we can't stop) playing and allow ourselves to discover or invent the conceit that there are games in nature, too, something like a grand cosmic game that interminably bleeds into whatever we might have thought intimate and social life involve. Or could involve, from the most forgettable and trivial exchanges to the cruelest acts. The interest or desire of this bleed is that it colors just those relations that so many of us are usually inclined - and often trained or forced - to conceive of and live out as rule-bound and competitive. Including self-relations. And this within an imagination where rules are not negotiable, but accepted all at once out of duty or the responsibility of so-called fair play (a kind of morality, or at least good practice for moral behavior). Increased exposure to the cosmic game could change all of that. Do these suppositions sound sufficiently inviting? We could begin with how we live out the rules and competitions that seem most trivial - those of discrete, ordinary games - I mean, what we usually think of as games.

2

The play of discrete or ordinary games is the privileged object of the theories of writers such as the historian Huizinga; these theories make play and games the oldest and most basic stratum of human life. I am fascinated by such theories. The idea is to some extent just beautiful: play as a "voluntary activity," "older than culture," that "has nothing to do with necessity or utility, duty or truth."¹ Though it is an originary stratum, Huizinga does his best not to present this as an evolution: "... we do not mean that play turns into culture, rather that in its earliest phases culture has the play-character, that it proceeds in the shape and in the mood of play" (46). For those of us who like to play at speculative anthropology, especially the speculative anthropology of what is called prehistory, there is much to be excited about here. At the same time, whatever the fascination that such arguments exert on us, they should arouse suspicion as well. It all has to do with how (or by whom) play and games are imagined. Huizinga (but it is not just him, obviously) always describes play as part of a game; he always describes the game as discrete (which seems to come down to being governed by rules); and he always describes the discrete game as a contest or at least the "representation of a contest" (13): That is, it is competitive.² It is, predictably enough (according to him), the competitive aspect of games that eventually and repeatedly gives birth to cultures or civilization.

¹ *Homo Ludens*, 7,1,158.

² In his summary of the "formal characteristics" of play, Huizinga lists first the rather abstract quality of play's separateness from ordinary life; but, immediately, he moves to more concrete criteria: the boundaries of time and space and the rules that make that possible. These criteria undergird his later claim that the contest is central in games (8-13).

Reading Huizinga, one might disappointedly conclude that his conception of play as games and of games as rule-bound and competitive is far too narrow. Painfully so. But this poverty of perspective can be interesting if we ask ourselves how it might have come about, what sort of attitude it bespeaks. In this sense the root of the problem might be that to accept that play and games compose the base stratum of culture involves entirely too much seriousness. This would be descended from or instantiated as the seriousness, one imagines, of the contest. Given that he repeatedly states that “play is the direct opposite of seriousness” (5), one might conclude that he did not think he was playing when he wrote the book.³ He instead seems to be in the grips, precisely, of a seriousness that divides what is and what is not (play, for starters). For me this is something like the seriousness that Stirner once linked with what he called possession: “there is nothing more serious than a lunatic when he comes to the central point of his lunacy; then his great earnestness incapacitates him for taking a joke.”⁴

These things unfortunately seem to go together: the seriousness of the thesis (of proposing, sometimes, but especially of maintaining or defending a thesis, that “central point” of one’s “lunacy”), and the rules one endlessly discovers once one sets out in search of them. Whether or not and to what extent the rules are fully known is a matter of power, or what seems to be power - and the search for rules is a competitive move, an attempt at a coup in the game, the unmentionable intellectual game: the contest of the thesis and of rules. Huizinga makes play the origin of civilization and cultures, but not the totality of them, not their very practice, and certainly not their end point, because he was, or at least thought he had to sound, serious. He might have thought, more or less consciously, that he had to repeat the same transition from game through contest to cultural or civilized institutions that he hypothesized. To do this, he had to imagine play in the form of discrete, competitive games with specific sets of rules.

For Huizinga, it seems, play and games can be an at least chronological origin of culture, but only as preparations, only as experiments concerning the next stages, the official seriousness and misery of which is all too familiar to some of us. Playing games and freely (arbitrarily, even) accepting their rules and competitions in the name of play slides all too arbitrarily (freely, even) into not freely accepting rules (and everything that game rules might, according to Huizinga, be practice for: innumerable conventions, customs, moral codes, laws) in the name of Society, or of Normality, or, if one thinks too much like a certain unhappy sort of social scientist, the structures and functions of cultures and social life, with all of their explicit and implicit formulations. A culture and its taboos. A state and its laws. A language and its grammar. Et cetera.

It seems to me that some procedure like this extends from our engagement in apparently discrete, rule-bound, and competitive games to most or even all of our intimate and social relations, manifest as our more or less spontaneous apprehension of life as rule- or law-bound. (This is going too fast, I know, but that’s the game I am playing). The interest of proposals like Huizinga’s is that, used otherwise, they suggest a situational, everyday model for how one makes the sup-

³ At least as I understand its overall movement. I do fear I might seem ungenerous in my criticisms, seeing as Huizinga’s argument continually undermines itself in stray remarks. For example: “Play cannot be denied. You can deny, if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play” (3). But then why take the seriousness emergent from play so seriously? In some sense my entire essay could be taken as an attempt to vindicate some of Huizinga’s propositions against the grain of the overall movement of *Homo Ludens*.

⁴ *Ego and its Own*, 62. As I was writing this I recalled the idea of “playfulness” proposed by the feminist philosopher Maria Lugones, which sets out precisely from a rejection of the “agonistic” focus of the theory of play in *Homo Ludens*.

posedly spontaneous larger assumption of the two. One begins (but this is rarely a beginning! - it is usually a repetition) to play a discrete game. Think of the invocation of society or cultures, for example, as an agent of some sort, not to speak of morality, nation, religion! Thanks to such an imaginary model we might come to see practically any thing, process, or abstraction as an imaginary agent: a Fate, a God, a Cause, demanding respect and inspiring hope and fear, each so harmful in its own way. I am referring first and foremost to the ordinary, colloquial use of these words, but also to how we are bound by what we unconsciously suppose that they involve. They are in some sense modeled, I will playfully propose, on our engagement with the apparently discrete, rule-bound, and competitive games, and not the other way around!

It might then be an occupational hazard of those who write on play and games that they do not sound either playful or gaming. I include myself in this, of course; and if I hope to overcome this obstacle, it is not by being funny (at least not on purpose), but rather by being parodic, paradoxical and occasionally nonsensical.

3

Some years after Huizinga, the philosopher Deleuze, playing his way out of what was known as structuralism, wrote a fine text on play and games, inspired by Lewis Carroll. What I have been calling discrete or ordinary games, Deleuze dubbed Normal Games, suggesting that they are “mixed” - they involve chance, of course, but “only at certain points”; the rest of their play (?) “refers to another type of activity, labor, or morality.”⁵ We can think of social activities as games, à la Huizinga, only because we think of games in the restricted, “mixed” economy of Normal Games that involve the acceptance of rules and a possible competition. That is, normal games always refer their play to a norm that is taken to be serious, outside of the play-sphere. Otherwise there seems to be no game. Without games, no society, no culture - and, maybe then, no self?

The alternative to this ought to sound nonsensical. To the seriousness of the thesis and its contest one might propose an alternative, a whimsical or funny thought (*drole de pensee*, as Leibniz once wrote) that takes on the play of the world⁶ as its uncommon perspective, as its excessive subjectivity, playing at but never seriously claiming the reality of an infinite play-world (as opposed, for example, to the necessarily finite work-world often invoked by those fascinated by terms such as scarcity or production).

The ideal Game is Deleuze’s name for this funny thought of the cosmic game or the play of the world. It has no rules and is entirely too chaotic to allow for any skillful use of chance (meaning the mechanical consequences of well-executed moves). Every Normal Game flirts with chance to some degree or another, and plays, Deleuze wrote, at mastering it. And if one is serious one might think one has. All too often that desire for mastery, which bears ultimately on one’s intimate relation to the macrocosm (but is rarely - if ever - consciously felt as such) collapses into the specialized microfascism of so many games, into an obsessive clinging to the rules, the little cruelties of competition, and (more interestingly) what is called cheating.⁷

⁵ *Logic of Sense*, 59.

⁶ If I can rescue this phrase from Kostas Axelos, who stressed that play should not become a new slogan, only to produce a theory of play that I regard, for reasons I won’t go into here, precisely as a philosophical dead-end characterized by vague sloganeering.

⁷ On this last point, Huizinga almost agrees. Discussing those he calls “spoil-sports,” he writes: “the outlaw, the

My problem with Deleuze's version of the Ideal Game is that he states, first of all, that it can't be played "by either man or God." Worse, "it would amuse no one" (*Logic*, 60). He writes that, ultimately, "it can only be thought as nonsense." I wonder why this did not suggest another idea of play and of amusement, such that, not negating but simply and nonsensically contradicting the first two claims, the Ideal Game can't but be played by people and Gods (if any); and it not only amuses everyone but is precisely the Amusing as such!

All of this matters if one wants to take a position. In some sense, I do. To begin with, I want to reveal as games activities that do not appear to be games, complicating or even dissolving the distinction between discrete play-spheres and the supposedly serious worlds of culture. Eventually, I want to open up all apparently discrete games, acknowledged and unacknowledged, to the Ideal Game. But whereas the first move has to do with revealing what is rule-bound but does not appear to be so, the second, the opening to the Ideal Game, dissolves all of these apparent and more or less concealed rules in a grand chaotic complication that shows all of them as arbitrary. In all this I want to expand and intensify the spheres of play. But I want to play my way into that position, and so I know I will have to playfully abandon it now and then, lest it become the central point of a lunacy I prefer to avoid.

4

I don't want it to seem as though I am blaming the problem of the impoverished imagination of play I have diagnosed in Huizinga on the seriousness of professors alone. Really, there is no one to blame, unless we want to engage in the superstitious invocation of imaginary agents: "Society tells us that play..." "Our culture says that games..." So many ways of inverting the vital flow, making play depend on seriousness and not the other way around! Almost everyone I have spoken with about what I am writing about games responds that it seems that to them, too, that a game is always or at least typically rule-bound and competitive:

Rule-bound The assumption that play involves accepting a certain set of dictates, oral or written, that govern the activity, defining its beginning and end as well as all possible or available moves, and delimiting the space and time of play.

Competitive The assumption that one should engage the rules in such a way as to use skill or chance to best one or more opponents. (Though one might immediately ask if one can ever use chance, or is better said to be used by it).

In both of these aspects we might be able to discern how games are mixed (in Deleuze's sense), referring to other activities whose rules are hidden or all too obvious, but which are in either case not usually conceived as games. This is the secret morality of play.

If it is our whim to open the idea of games in other directions, we could, first of all, explore the ambiguities in these two aspects. We can likely summon up at least a few memories of solitary play,⁸ or of play involving optional or variable rules, or of collaboration or co-operation that

revolutionary, the cabbalist or member of a secret society, indeed heretics of all kinds, are of a highly associative if not sociable disposition, and a certain element of play is prominent in all their doings" (12). *Their dissent is to play another game.*

⁸ It is telling that Huizinga devalues solitary play except when it can be related to some future contest (13, 47).

appear beside or as part of competition. True, it might be argued that these are only subjective or experiential aspects of play. But that is precisely what is most important here, since it seems to me that to assume games are by definition rule-bound and competitive itself derives from conceiving and practicing them as discrete. That conception, that practice, comprise an attitude, or a series of attitudes. And that is, by most definitions, subjective. An attitude that refuses the assumption that games are always discrete leads, first, to affirming any perspective that allows itself the conceit of acting in a given situation as if it were a game. Dwelling sufficiently within this perspective might ultimately lead to the realm of play and games beyond rules and competition, to the Ideal Game. Inevitably, the Ideal Game involves a subjective (or even existential - why not?) dimension: the feeling of the game as opening onto life or the cosmos, the sense of their tendential coincidence. This feeling, the anticipation or mere possibility of this feeling, might be why some of us bother with supposedly discrete games at all.

Sadly, it seems that a more common reason to play Normal Games is to practice our superstitions. I am thinking first and foremost of the superstition that competition matters at all. But I am also thinking of what does not appear to be a game, that which we are invited or forced to take seriously. So often being serious amounts to being superstitious! As a philosopher, I know this well: how many times, in how many conversations, have I asked myself if my interlocutor is (superstitiously) certain of being right, or playing at the game of acting, speaking, as though he is right?⁹ Of course I am not invoking any sort of cosmic truth beyond the play of the world, truth beyond the game that plays at being right. Why would I, if my desire is to keep playing, to play the game of truth, among other games?

5

I propose an interpretation of one discrete game, Tag, which opens onto a speculative anthropology. In this game, It comes to any given player from outside. Or at least so it seems. To be tagged, to be It, is to be marked. To bear the mark, however temporarily, is to be treated as someone or something else than the play-group. The tag, the temporary position of being It, has to do with otherness. Tag is the game of us and not-us. It is always an other-than-us that circulates. Perhaps Tag is the game of a group's self-understanding, so that It is always a position that is sacrificial or sacred, above or below the group. Whatever It is has a special accursed power, and always has to be avoided, denied, warded off. For its part, It approaches us, chases us, lures us, traps us, and, if it is lucky, infects us, passing It on. So Tag could be a game of persecution; but at the same time, it could be a game that valorizes or grants power to what is persecuted. That is why it is so easy to interpret Tag as a liberatory game (it teaches how to avoid the one who tries to assume power, as well as how easily this position can circulate). That is also why it is so easy to interpret Tag as an oppressive game (it teaches ostracism, xenophobia, scapegoating, etc).

I chose Tag because it is characteristic of a number of children's games that have very simple (and often modified) rules, and that are transmitted orally. Such games are likely very ancient. If we playfully suppose that this game belongs to an anonymous and interminable childhood of humanity, there is room to wonder at what it reveals beyond its function as a Normal Game (there is room to ask if certain children's games, those that are truly of children and not imposed on them, are ever normal). If we playfully assume that Tag is an ancient game, passed down orally

⁹ I use the male pronoun here for autobiographical reasons alone.

since prehistoric times, it could be part of how the distinctions between kin groups, tribes, and ultimately humans and animals, or humans and spirits, might have originally been distributed. Maybe Tag is the explicit form of an utterly common, nearly universal game of inclusion- exclusion, communication-persecution that shapes, playfully and not structurally, countless groups, communities, and cultures. That some games, like Tag, are considered to be for children, or to embody the childish in whoever plays, suggests that games, as passing manifestations of play, are endlessly codified and controlled through the recording and imposition of rules that seem to subordinate play, and especially what in play is healthy and vital, to set rules and competition. Adherence to rules and enthusiasm about competition can often save one from being regarded as childish. Competition reinstates, or at least gives folks ground to reinstate, seriousness. This is the value of Huizinga's proposal that games are the beginning of culture and civilization. And superstition? Consider these common malaises:

that by following the rules I might be lucky enough to conquer Fate (fortune), or appease the gods (this is the ancient model: chance as Fortune or the gods) that I can get the better of Fate by means of whatever makes me lucky: joining the victorious Cause and genuinely or disingenuously working for it (this is the modern - at least Euromodern - model: the enlightened gamble of the average democratic citizen).

Such superstitions, whatever kind of psychic or social genesis they have, seem to suppress timelessly healthy thoughts such as:

our superstitions, however inevitable, are of no real help

all of life is a game and has no set rules.

Tag is the game that, in its play, celebrates the circulation of the object, the thing, and the subject, the self. It, the thing, the mark, is what makes the game go. In this sense the game playfully inverts the world that a certain common sense suggests we live in - a world in which the subjects or selves make it go. When we seriously distinguish thing and self, or, at another level, who is and who is not in our tribe or group, we are playing at some variant of this game. The difference is that the playful (childish) version and the serious (adult) version are focused on different questions. The latter wants to know: "who is It?" The former: "how does It circulate?" In the childish version, the otherness of It, whatever it is called upon to designate, sacred or sacrificial, circulates: it could be any of us. If It is the enemy, this position circulates endlessly. I say endlessly because at least the common version of the game has no set end. But this raises the question of how the game begins: does It really come from outside? How (or by whom) is it decided who is It at the beginning? It might be arbitrary - or only seem so. Isn't there always a list of usual suspects?

It is possible that in games like Tag an archaic stratum of the life of the first humans continues to be passed on, even as they continue to be identified with children as a kind of official outside, maintained, at least in modernity, through the child/adult distinction. But this is also perhaps a response to the persistence of this stratum. It seems that there is power and resistance in this transmission. But why invoke a historical transmission at all? It depends on how we think of or live out our history. If history obeys rules or has a pattern, an order (stages, even), a telos (progress, even), then the codification of its rules is desirable. If it doesn't, if we think of or live

out history as another way of grasping the chaos of the ideal Game, then, to us, what we do with games is analogous to what we do with rules, laws, studies of rules, studies of laws: we grasp them as one form or another of a superstition concerning one form or another of victory, mastery, winning. Such are the stakes of the procedure I referred to earlier: rather than conceiving of play and games as the origin of and practice for culture as a historical affair, a chronological procession, we might instead imagine and practice them as the ever repeated, ever interruptible beginning of whatever in culture (and thus in history) appears to be all too serious.

6

"Do you propose, then, to do away with games?"

No, of course not. How could we, anyway?

"With Normal Games?"

No, not exactly. This funny thought concerns how they are played. Wouldn't one always want to be careful of the moment where one assumes whatever rules to be one's own? When one entered that ambiance or milieu? *"To always invoke the Ideal Game?"*

Sort of. But who would want to speak in the name of the Ideal Game, anyway? To render it divine?

The virtue, presumably, in all this would not be to come to see Normal Games as less desirable (that is a matter of taste) - but to recognize, to get better at recognizing, situations in which one is invited or forced to compete seriously, in which competition seems necessary for play. It has more to do with the ability or attitude that recognizes a potential game in whatever is supposed to be serious - where rules, codes, laws (etc) appear without explicit reference to the element of chance. Where the chance element is ignored, devalued, apparently set aside. For me this means that it is assumed, relied on, gambled on, in a very superstitious, a very dangerous way. This has everything to do with how (or by whom) a game is played, and ultimately with what is conceived or not conceived as a game.

Indeed, this might be the superior use of the Normal Game: playing in such a way as to show any number of so-called serious activities to be variants of Normal Games, in the sense that assuming the rules of Normal Games might habituate us (think again of children) to accepting rules in situations that do not seem to be games, and not assuming them in that common way opens up every Normal Game to the play of the world.

I would like to recall here the Situationists' definition of a situation, especially its invocation of a play of events. The challenge of the infamous definition is of course the tension implied in "deliberately and concretely constructing" a situation in a way that combines the play of events with the "collective organization of a unitary ambiance."¹⁰

A situation, it seems to me, is like a Normal Game, but precisely one that is programmed to be open to the Ideal Game. In this sense it is like a machine that assumes the unpredictable (should we just call it time?) as its own. Normal Games involve an attempt to master chance, which is of course macrocosmically impossible. Still, every Normal Game plays as or in the Ideal Game in some way or another, more or less gracefully. What is the interest of a match or contest where the outcome is known? A situation, in this sense, is a graceful move, a display of virtuosity, in a game of social relations. Think of it as the unlikeliest machine: "The machine to affirm chance ...

¹⁰ *Situationist International Anthology*, 45.

the machine to release these immense forces by small, multiple manipulations, the machine to play with the stars, in short the Heraclitean fire machine.”¹¹

7

Another way of proposing such an attitude might begin by noting that what is interesting in the play of Normal Games is not the endgame, the final moves, wherein something or other is decided (victory, or judgment, an entire imaginary of apocalypse that plagues would-be revolutionaries as much or more so than most others), but taking a position. Maybe rules ultimately derive or depend on this taking of a position (how one takes a position, or creates a situation), such that play is irreversibly altered. A sense of where and when one invokes not just the derivation of rules, but the derivation of the board, or table, or court - the delimited zone where the game imagined as the Normal Game is played. The board corresponds (this is going too fast, again!) to something like an imagination of space that defines what rules apply and how one plays. It is an imagination of ambiance, of place, of milieu - and, given whatever space or place, there are specialists who will tell us what rules apply there. Again: a culture and its taboos. A state and its laws. A language and its grammar. Et cetera. But why place the emphasis on these, when what is vital and primary is this taking of a position, affirming where and when one is?

Almost any game can involve a vaguer, broader idea of play. So one might want to consider moves in and out of Normal Game play. First, into and out of other Normal Games, and then into and out of activities that do not yet seem to be games. Interestingly, this is easier when there is no board, physical or otherwise, and the game is a word game or gesture game, a game made up just for the occasion, whose rules are looser, as yet unformed, or explicitly variable. In this way we might be able to interpret intragame moves as taking positions in the general economy of the Ideal Game.

In this change of attitude towards games, what I would like to expand is precisely what is most interesting about play: the opportunities to study one's own stupidities and desires for humiliation, and the opportunities for virtuosity. Of course I do not want to do away with virtuosity! (Or honor, or even glory, if those virtues can be separated from a small-minded concern with victory.) Normal Games have always been opportunities to develop and display some bizarre virtuosity; for my part, I want to develop the bizarre as opportunity. I think here in passing of the novel and affirmative sense given to competition by Fourier. But I also must include the sport's gesture, the nonsensical refusal to play a game, as in the anecdote Huizinga relates about a certain Shah of Persia, "supposed to have declined the pleasure of attending a race meeting, saying that he knew very well that one horse runs faster than another" (49). Huizinga comments: "From his point of view he was perfectly right: he refused to take part in a play-sphere that was alien to him, preferring to remain outside." In any case, true virtuosity would be to open up the Normal Game to that outside, which I have been calling the Ideal Game. If one wants to compete (and, undeniably, some of us do) they might try competing with nature.

Competing with nature? A move in a game is defined (or at least definable) in terms of game rules - but is at the same time the index of a position, a temporary arrangement or disposition in one or more broader and fuzzier spheres of play. Those fuzzy spheres are interminable, infinite. The extent to which we conceive them as bounded reflects exactly to what extent we more or

¹¹ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 36.

less consciously conceive of nature or cosmos as bound by laws or a divine hierarchy. This is my move, my position: nature or cosmos is the outside, unbounded in every sense. Which is perhaps how, playfully, we might have come to admit that nature also - and eminently - plays games. But if that kind of language is too abstract, turn to your lover and say, "this is a game." Turn to your parents or children and say, "this is a game." Turn to your friends and enemies and say, "this is a game." Say silently to your self and any imaginary entities you discover in solitude, "this is a game." See what happens next.

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Anarchist Meditations, or: Three Wild Interstices of Anarchism and Philosophy

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Abstract

Philosophers allude to anarchist practices; philosophers allude to anarchist theorists; anarchists allude to philosophers (usually in search of theory to add to the canon). What is missing in this schema, I note with interest, is anarchists alluding to philosophical practices. These are the wild interstices: zones of outlandish contact for all concerned.

Todo está ya en su punto, y el ser persona en el mayor.

Conocer las cosas en su punto, en su sazón, y saberlas lograr.

— Baltasar Gracián

Failure and the Third

I dare to call certain turbulent interstices of anarchy and philosophy *wild*. I feel that there is a lot of activity there, but not (yet) along predictable lines. For some time now, those interested have been hearing about several other such interstices: tamer ones, from my point of view. Or at least more recognizable. So let us play the familiar game of theory and practice, that game in which we presuppose them as separate and seek to claim them reunited. From within the play of this game, the tame interstices are variations on the following moves: philosophers allude to anarchist practices; philosophers allude to anarchist theorists; anarchists allude to philosophers (usually in search of theory to add to the canon). What is missing in this schema, I note with interest, is anarchists alluding to philosophical practices. These are the wild interstices: zones of outlandish contact for all concerned, I think.

But there are other games to play, even if they are only innocent games of exposition. I think it is important and interesting to stop presupposing separation, to dissolve its painful distribution of thinking and action. That is, we might hazard the risky game (which is also an experience, an exercise) in which *there are no theories, no practices*; just more or less remarkable enactments of ways of life, available in principle to absolutely anyone, absolutely anywhere.¹

Anecdotally, these reflections have a double genesis. The first occurred some years ago, when I was asked at an anarchist gathering to participate in a panel on “anarchism and post-structuralism.” It was around the time some began speaking of and writing about post-anarchism. The conversation failed, I think, in that no one learned anything. Of the four speakers, two were roughly in favour of engaging with post-structuralism and two against. I write *roughly* because we seemed to agree that “post-structuralism” is at best an umbrella term, at worst a garbage term, not acknowledged by most of the authors classed within it, and not particularly helpful in conversations such as that one. As if there really were two massive aggregates on either side of the “and” we were being asked to discuss! Indeed, the *worst* possible sense that something called post-anarchism could have would be the imaginary collusion of two crudely conceived imaginary aggregates. During the discussion, a participant asked the panel a question: “how do post-structuralist anarchists organize?” Of course the question went unanswered, though some of us tried to point out that there just aren’t, and cannot be, post-structuralist anarchists in the same sense that there are or may be anarcho-communists or anarcho-feminists or primitivists,

¹ I feel strongly about those last two phrases. But I would add that such experiments should interest us in philosophy outside of universities and anarchism — better, anarchy — beyond activist groups.

etc. The operative reason was that our interlocutor seemed to be (involuntarily?) imagining post-structuralism as a form of theory, and anarchism primarily as a form of practice with no spontaneous or considered theory of its own. This is a variant of the familiar schema of separation, in which theory offers the analysis that informs practices, a.k.a. “organizing.” No go.

That night, I also posed a question, one that went unanswered: “is there a third?” I meant to ask both about the status of anarchism and post-structuralism as massive, clumsy imaginary aggregates, and also about the presupposed separation in their implicit status as forms of practice and theory. Or perhaps merely to hint at the unacknowledged efficacy of the *and*, its silent labour, its gesture towards possible experiences. What I have to say here is my own attempt to answer that question as provocatively as possible. I will begin with this claim (which I think does not presuppose separation): it is precisely the apparent political failures of what I am now glad to have done with referring to as post-structuralism that could make certain texts and authors interesting. And it is precisely the supposed theoretical failures of what it is still a little silly to call anarchism that could make its peculiar sensibilities attractive.

Indeed, the great and continuing interest of anarchism for philosophers (and for anarchists, if they are willing to learn this lesson) could be that it has never successfully manifested itself as a theoretical system. Every attempt at an anarchist system is happily incomplete. That is what I suppose concerned our interlocutor that night: he was worried, perhaps, about the theoretical insufficiency of anarchism compared with what appeared to be an overwhelming array of theories and concepts on the other side. In this anxious picture, the array seeks to vampirically attach itself to whatever practice, interpreting, applying itself to, *dominating*, ultimately, its motions. ‘Theories without movements: *run!*’ I would prefer to invert the terms and claim the apparent theoretical weakness of anarchism as one of its greatest virtues. For its commonplaces (direct action, mutual aid, solidarity, affinity groups, etc.) are not concepts but forms of social practice. As such, they continually, virally, infect every even remotely extraparliamentary or grassroots form of political action. And, beyond politics, they compose a kind of interminable reserve of social intelligence. In all this they neither require a movement to become manifest nor compose one by default of tendentially existing. In this sense, what anarchism offers to philosophers (to the philosophers any of us are or might be) is that it has been and remains primarily a way of life. Its asystematicity and its persistent recreation as a way of life probably account for the fact that anarchism, as theory, has never been incorporated into or as an academic discipline.²

Anarchism acts as an untimely echo of how philosophy was once lived, and how, indirectly and in a subterranean fashion, it continues to be lived. And, paradoxically, we might learn something about how it is lived by reference to philosophical practices.

Dramatization: Wild Styles

Practices, or simply philosophy as a way of life: that is the second genesis of what I have to say here. This idea crystallized in studying, of all things, the ancient Stoics. Seeking to give a

² Cf., David Graeber’s remarks in *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (2004: 2–7). One might also consider here Lacan’s theory of the four discourses, proposed, among other places, in *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*: first, in his problematization of the status of psychoanalysis in its relation to the university discourse (there are interesting parallels with what I have written about anarchist theory); secondly, in light of the connections he implies between the hysterical discourse, the master’s discourse, and revolutionary movements. To show the singular status of the analyst’s discourse, Lacan often provoked his audience by wondering aloud if there were any analysts. My way of adopting this

(pedagogical) sense to Stoic logic, physics, and ethics as a lived unity and not as components of what they already called a “theoretical discourse,”³ I had recourse to the elaboration of the practice of spiritual exercises by Pierre Hadot. He describes them as follows: “practices which could be physical, as in dietary regimes, or discursive, as in dialogue and meditation, or intuitive, as in contemplation, but were all intended to effect a modification and a transformation in the subject who practised them” (Hadot, 2005: 6).⁴ Or, again: “The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being. It is a progress which causes us to *be* more fully, and makes us better. It is a conversion which turns our entire life upside down, changing the life of the person who goes through it” (Hadot, 1995: 83). Briefly, it’s that every statement that is still remarkable in the fragments and doxographical reports is so in light of its staging (dramatization, theatricalization) as part of a meditative practice that might have been that of a Stoic.

Hadot offers several examples from the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius demonstrating that logic and physics, the purportedly theoretical components of Stoicism, were already and immediately part of ethical practice. Logic as a “mastery of inner discourse” (Hadot, 2005: 135): “always to define or describe to oneself the object of our perception so that we can grasp its essential nature unadorned, a separate and distinct whole, to tell oneself its particular name as well as the names of the elements from which it was made and into which it will be dissolved” (Aurelius, 1983: III, 11). Physics as “recognizing oneself as part of the Whole” (Hadot, 2005: 137), but also the practice of seeing things in constant transformation: “Acquire a systematic view of how all things change into one another; consistently apply your mind to, and train yourself in, this aspect of the universe” (Aurelius, 1983: X, 11).

I contend that such spiritual exercises are theories *dramatized* as subjective attitudes. As the pivot of the whole system or at least of its comprehensibility as such, the role of logic and physics for the Stoics must have been precisely that of a training for ethical thought and action. But in some sense the converse is even more compelling: subjective attitudes, their theatre, seem to secrete theory as a detritus in need of being taken up again — precisely in the form of a new or repeated exercise, a renewed dramatization. Setting aside the labyrinthine complications of the entanglement with what is still badly understood as Fate, I would like to retain this much of Stoic ethics in my anarchist meditations: to find if there is anything to affirm in what confronts us, what we encounter. Concluding a recent essay, I shared a desire “to affirm something, perhaps all, of our present conditions, without recourse to stupid optimism, or faith” (de Acosta, 2009: 34). I would like to speculatively expand on the practice of such affirmations. As Gilles Deleuze once put it: “either ethics makes no sense at all, or this is what it means and has nothing else to say: not to be unworthy of what happens to us”⁵ (Deleuze, 1990: 49). What we encounter cannot but provoke thought; if it can, meaning, if we allow it to, there is something to affirm, and this affirmation is immediately joyful. How we might thoughtfully allow events, places, actions,

humorous provocation would be to ask if there are any anarchists. Finally, I recall here Monsieur Dupont’s text on experience: “Nobody can be an anarchist in the sense that the ideology of anarchism proposes” (*Nihilist Communism*, 2009: 202).

³ That is, philosophical *logos*. See Diogenes Laërtius, in *The Stoics Reader*, 8. I was trying to teach that these spiritual exercises cannot be taught, only modelled and perhaps imitated.

⁴ The discursive and intuitive senses indicated in the definition are the most relevant here.

⁵ Or, more obscurely: “not being inferior to the event, becoming the child of one’s own events” (Deleuze, 1987: 65).

scenes, phrases — “what happen to us,” in short — to unfold in the direction of joy is the explicit or implicit question of every spiritual exercise.

I propose, then, an interlinked series of fantastic spiritual exercises: meditations for anarchists — or on anarchy. They have, I suppose, been implicit in every significant anarchist discourse so far (including, of course, the many that have not called themselves anarchist) (cf., de Acosta, 2009). They have been buried, indirect, assumed but unstated, in these discourses. Or at least in much of their reception. In each of these three forms (or styles) of exercise what is pivotal is some use of the imagination — at least the imaginative-ideational uptake, Stoic *phantasia* or *phantasma*, of written or spoken discourse, and of what is given to thought in experience.⁶ So, we are concerned here with experiential dispositions, attitudes that at first seem subjective but are ultimately prior to the separation of subject and object, and perhaps even of possible and real.

Whatever happens, these exercises are *available*. I will not opine on their ultimate importance, especially not on their relevance to existing movements, groups, strategies, or tactics. In what fashion and to what degree any of these exercises can be applied to another activity — if that is even possible — is ultimately up to any of us to decide upon in the circumstances that we find ourselves in, or through situations that we create. The status of these meditations is that of a series of experiments, or experiences, whose outcome and importance is unknown at the outset and perhaps even at the conclusion.

I will have recourse in what follows to texts and authors that preceded what is now called anarchism, or were, or *are*, its difficult contemporaries, so as to underline that what matters in anarchist meditations are the attitudes that they make available, not any actual or possible theory or group that they may eventually secrete. The secret importance of anarchy is the short-circuit it interminably introduces between such attitudes and action, and back — what is badly conceived as spontaneity. (Or worse, “voluntarism,” in the words of our enemies...)

Perhaps, then, the truly compelling reason to call the three forms of meditation *wild styles* is that anarchists have no *archon*, no school, no real training in or modelling of these activities outside of scattered and temporary communities and the lives of unusual individuals. *But* they can and do happen: interminably, yes, and also informally, irregularly, and unpredictably. That is their interest and their attraction.

First Wild Style: Daydream

A Daydream may take the form of a *meditative affirmation* that informs how we might read so-called utopian writers. Of these I will discuss the absolutely most fascinating. It is Fourier, with his taxonomy of the passions; with his communal phalansteries; with his tropical new earth, *aigresel* oceans, and kaleidoscopic solar system; ultimately, with his Harmonian future. What are we to do today with such a discourse? A version of this first wild style is beautifully laid out in the following remarks by Peter Lamborn Wilson:

Fourier’s *future* would impose an injustice on *our present*, since we Civilizees cannot hope to witness more than a foretaste of Harmony, if it were not for his highly origi-

⁶ On *phantasia* and *phantasma*, see Inwood & Gerson (2008: 12). As will become evident further on, there is also some question here of the madness/ordinariness of *speaking to oneself*, silently or aloud, and of a concomitant

nal and somewhat mad eschatology. [...] One of the things we can do with Fourier's system is to hold it within our consciousness and attention in the form of a mandala, not questioning whether it be literally factually true, but whether we can achieve some sort of "liberation" through this strange meditation. The future becoming of the solar system, with its re-arrangement of planets to form dances of colored lights, can be visualized as a tantric adept uses a yantra of cosmogenic significance, like a Sufi meditation on "photisms" or series of visionary lights, to focus and integralize our own individual realization of the potential of harmony within us, to overcome our "prejudices against matter, which is represented to us as a vile principle" by philosophers and priests (Lamborn, 1998: 17–17).

From which I would like to retain at least the following: first, we can affirm nothing in the present unless we acknowledge that the future is unthinkable, unimaginable. Fourier did write, after all, that if we sorry Civilizees could grasp the ramifications of the entire Combined Order, we would be immediately struck dead (Fourier, 1996: 67). (This, by the way, seems to be why he was more given to examples about Harmonian banquets than ones about Harmonian orgies.) So, with respect to direct action, his intention is clear enough: one does not build Harmony as such, because it is unimaginable; one builds the commune, the phalanstery. (That is why so much of *The Theory of the Four Movements*, for example, is dedicated to a discussion of transitional phases, e.g. "Guaranteeism").⁷ This practice is focused, however, through a contemplation in which we are not planning for a future that is, after all, unforeseeable; we are dreaming, fantasizing, but in a peculiarly concentrated way, acting on ourselves in the present.

Secondly, setting aside the future, one can somehow meditate on Fourier's system. And not just the system as totality; perhaps the most effective form of this meditative affirmation that I can report on is that which focuses on one single and exceptionally absurd element of Fourier's speculations: for example, the *archibras*, a prehensile tail he claims humans will develop, good, as Lamborn Wilson notes, for fruit-picking as well as orgies. Or the sixteen kinds of strawberries, or the lemonade ocean, or the anti-giraffe.⁸ Fourier is as dumbfounding when he describes the industrial armies of Harmony as he is when he suddenly reveals one of these strange Harmonian monads to his audience.

It seems to me that Lamborn Wilson suggests an entirely different mode of reading and experiencing Fourier's writings than either the impatient critique of so-called scientific socialism or the predictably tolerant pick-and-choose of the other socialists and anarchists. To focus on what is systematic, or appears to be so, in Fourier, is to try to recreate for ourselves his precise derangement, to train our thinking in the paths of his mad logic, the voice of his desires, without for all that believing in anything. Especially Harmony. As he wrote: "passionate attraction is the interpreter of nature" (Fourier, 1996: 189). I will accept this only if it can be agreed that interpretation is already an action, on ourselves first of all. (For example, it might be a healthy use of the same imaginative faculties that many of us squander on video feeds of one sort or another.)

recognition of familiar and unfamiliar phrases, with their differends. I will take this up in a future essay.

⁷ Compare, in this light, the delirious foldout "Table of the Progress of Social Movement" spanning 80,000 years with the utterly practical propositions of the "Note to the Civilized Concerning the Coming Social Metamorphosis."

⁸ See (Fourier, 1996: 50n, 284). The anti-giraffe is one of the new animals of Harmony, "a great and magnificent servant whose qualities will far surpass the good qualities of the reindeer."

A similar meditative affirmation could allow one to make good use of “P.M.’s” infamous zero-work tract *bolo’bolo*. The text opens with a short predictive narrative about the “substruction of the planetary work machine” by the construction of small autonomous communes or *bolos* networked together into the global *bolo’bolo*. We are, by the way, twenty-two years too late; *bolo’bolo* should have emerged in 1988. The bulk of this tract, however, is taken up by a series of systematic elements that may become themes for Daydreams. It is the ideographic sign language of *bolo’bolo*, *asa’pili*, the series IBU, BOLO, SILA, TAKU ... each coupled with an invented ideograph. As with the hexagrams of the *Classic of Changes*, each heading encapsulates and illustrates a concept with a simple sign. Imagine the use of this artificial *lingua franca*: the ideographs and odd bisyllabic words could aid a certain meditative translation. IBU is and is not an ego; NIMA is and is not beliefs; TAKU is and is not private property; YAKA is and is not a duel. And so on. Confronted, then, with egos, beliefs, private property, or duels, I may always perform an exercise that translates them to *asa’pili*. This means asking, speculating on, the question: and what would do we do with all this in *bolo’bolo*? This language is said to be of a future and yet we are already using it, making new sense or even new worlds of sense with it.

The second systematic series occurs only once: it is an incredible list of sample *bolos*. “In a larger city, we could find the following *bolos*: Alco-bolo, Sym-bolo, Sado-bolo, Maso-bolo, Vegi-bolo, Les-bolo, Franko-bolo, Italo-bolo, Play-bolo, No-bolo, Retro-bolo, Thai-bolo, Sun-bolo [...]”⁹ It is again a linguistic operation at first, which is obvious since so many of these are puns. Once we are amused, the imagination begins its playful reverie. Once the suffix takes on consistency, we are dreaming other dreams. Imagine, not just Sado-bolo and Maso-bolo, but the relations between them. What are the parties in Dada-bolo like? The art of Tao-bolo? The dialect of Freak-bolo? As with the punctual things, events, or practices denoted by the terms of *asa’pili*, we have some initial sense, but our imagination is pushed to a new and more voluptuous level of complication and creation in conceiving each *bolo*, its inner workings, and the interrelations, or lack thereof, among *bolos*.

In neither case is there anything to believe in. Certainly not *bolo’bolo*! I maintain rather that to gather and concentrate one’s thought process using these signs or examples is to accept their provocation, to undertake a deviation, *détournement*, of the imaginative flux. In so doing we find, paradoxically, that we have names for otherwise unimaginable relations. We are in an even better position to do so than when the book first appeared since, according to its chronology, *bolo’bolo* should have already come about. So the more credulous among us, those unhappy souls awaiting some anarchist version of 2012 or the Apocalypse of John, will be stumped and disappointed. It can no longer be read as a book concerning (do please laugh here) ‘the current conjuncture.’ Two mostly unhappy decades have returned it to its fetal form: a wish, a mad dream, that models its madness in an exemplary fashion, precisely by drawing us into its codes. Each ideogram, each *bolo*’s name, is a monad. To meditatively grasp it is to attain a perspective on the otherwise impossible: to be a witness to *bolo’bolo*. It is only when we hopelessly use these monads that they

⁹ “[...] Blue-bolo, Paleo-bolo, Dia-bolo, Punk-bolo, Krishna-bolo, Taro-bolo, Jesu-bolo, Tao-bolo, Marl-bolo, Necro-bolo, Pussy-bolo, Para-bolo, Basket-bolo, Coca-bolo, Incapa-bolo, HighTech-bolo, Indio-bolo, Alp-bolo, Mono-bolo, Metro-bolo, Acro-bolo, Soho-bolo, Proto-bolo, Herb-bolo, Macho-bolo, Hebro-bolo, Ara-bolo, Freak-bolo, Straight-bolo, Pyramido-bolo, Marx-bolo, Sol-bolo, Tara-bolo, Uto-bolo, Sparta-bolo, Bala-bolo, Gam-bolo, Tri-bolo, Logo-bolo, Mago-bolo, Anarcho-bolo, Eco-bolo, Dada-bolo, Digito-bolo, Subur-bolo, Bom-bolo, Hyper-bolo, Rock n’-bolo, etc. Moreover, there are also just good old regular *bolos*, where people live normal, reasonable and healthy lives (whatever those are)” (P.M., 1985: 80–1).

can have an effect on our thinking-in-the-event: a healthy use of what Bergson called *la fonction fabulatrice*, perhaps even what Freud conceived as the wish-fulfillment involved in dreams.

Another sort of Daydream, the *meditative negation*, manifests in a similar way, as a summoning up of powerful, almost unthinkable images of destruction, specifically of consumption. I consider this strange passage by Max Stirner to be paradigmatic:

Around the altar rise the arches of the church and its walls keep moving further and further out. What they enclose is *sacred*. You can no longer get to it, no longer touch it. Shrieking with the hunger that devours you, you wander around about these walls and search for the little that is profane. And the circles of your course keep getting more and more extended. Soon that church will embrace the whole world, and you will be driven out to the extreme edge. Another step and the *world of the sacred* has conquered: you sink into the abyss. Therefore take courage while there it is yet time, wander about no longer in the profane where now it is dry feeding, dare the leap and rush the gates into the sanctuary itself. If you *devour the sacred* you have made it your *own*. Digest the sacramental wafer and you are rid of it (Stirner, 1995: 88–9).¹⁰

This is perhaps the most excessive of many such passages in *The Ego and its Own*. What is the status of this discourse? Just who is speaking here? What I is addressing me, presenting its ideas as my own? What is the altar, the church, its walls? What is the *sacred* exactly? What is the *hunger* referred to here? The *courage*? What does this apparently metaphorical act of eating entail in practice? As I have posed them, abstractly, these questions are unanswerable. I propose rather that the interest of passages such as these, their significance in Stirner's text, is that, functioning as a model, they allow one to project a parallel thought pattern onto one or more given sets of circumstances. This meditation could help me to divest myself of my allegiance to a stupid political group that I have made the mistake of joining; or it could save me from a noxious commonplace of sexual morality. In each case I would find the sacred element, identify its will to power, feel my impotence for a moment ("hunger") and then strike with courage, undoing the sacrificial logic that has possessed me.

The difference between meditative affirmation and negation is that in affirming I actively imagine a future that I do not take to be real; I explore its details to act on my own imagination, on my thought process, to contract other habits. In negation, as in affirmation, there is no future, just this present I must evacuate of its meaning. This meditation is a voiding process, a clearing of stupidities. It is what I do when I can find nothing to affirm in the present.

That is not the only form a meditative negation can take. Throughout *The Ego and its Own*, Stirner also deploys countless brief, pithy phrases that are not imagistic, but rather almost speech acts, cases of a kind of disruptive *direct action* in discourse: "I do not step shyly back from your property, but look upon it always as my property, in which I need to 'respect' nothing. Pray do the like with what you call my property!" (Stirner, 1995: 220). "I do not love [the world], I annihilate it as I annihilate myself; I dissolve it" (ibid., 262). I do not know what could possibly follow such statements, though something must. These phrases could be ironically spoken aloud to a coarse interlocutor as the mark of a necessary distance; they could also be thought silently to oneself,

¹⁰ I have already commented on this passage, with reference to related alimentary imagery in Nietzsche, in my "How the Stirner Eats Gods" (de Acosta, 2009).

as so many available elements of an egoist *tetrapharmakon* that could recall us to ourselves in even the most alienating moments.¹¹ The I that speaks in Stirner's text is more often than not offered as a common property, that is to say, not a property at all. It is a model, a case. It is there to be taken up, imitated, if we have the courage to be the confessed egoists we could be. Stirner was not describing the world, he was acting on it; so we too might act if we study and train ourselves in such imaginary and discursive exercises. Like anarchism, egoism cannot be taught, only modelled and perhaps imitated.

Second Wild Style: Field Trip

Although careful and generous acts of reading are vital to anarchist meditations, the exercises I am describing could also take the form of concentrations of thought developed not through engagement with written or spoken discourse but with the materiality of places. In affirmative or negative meditations, the question is that of another attitude, another tone of thought, another voice. And reading bizarre books is only one way to achieve it. A second form of exercise, the Field Trip, is a kind of *speculative anthropology of geographical spaces*. I will elaborate it through a detailed examination of one example, both for its richness and because I suppose many of my readers are unfamiliar with its source, a recent text from the sometime proponent of a "nihilist communism." In a tone sometimes echoing Bakunin, sometimes Bataille, "Frere Dupont," the pseudonymous author of *species being*, proposes that revolt is a sort of anthropological constant. It corresponds not so much to the organizations that seek to bring it about, or at least stimulate and channel it, but rather to an existential dimension of the human. Borrowing from another lexicon, I would say that for Dupont revolt is anthropogenetic. "The untheorized and non-included aspects of human existence is [*sic*] our platform" (Dupont, 2007: 47). I suppose the term "platform" is used here with tongue fully in cheek. What is this ironic project, then? "Our purpose is to develop a feral subject [...]" (ibid.). Very well: how is this subject *developed*?

Setting aside, perhaps even ignorant of, the procedures of scientific anthropology or archeology, Frere Dupont enters an archeological site in the East of England and reports:

It is noon on the Tenth of May. The year is Two Thousand and Six. I am crouching, my hands on the floorstone, in Pit One of Grime's Graves, a retrieved neolithic flint mining complex in Norfolk's Breckland. I have chosen this place to begin my investigation into the tendency within society to modify itself through the chosen activities that it undertakes in response to the perceived limits of itself. I have asked myself whether this tendency of transformation out of stability is explicable in terms of a motivational sense of lack and/or a sense of abundance (ibid., 48).

The question Dupont is asking could be understood to belong to political philosophy, ethics, anthropology, or any number of other disciplines. It is also, of course, a variant of the old anarchist question about the inception of the State-form and authoritarian politics: the institutionalized concentration of power.¹² This text bears with it the rare sense of a situated thought ("I have

¹¹ I am referring, of course, to the Epicurean *tetrapharmakon* or "four-part cure," the briefest epitome of their philosophy.

¹² The "centripetal" social organization, that is, whose emergence Pierre Clastres tried to understand in the essays collected in *Society Against the State* (1989).

chosen this place”), the unusual idea that it matters *where* one is when one thinks; or, again, the fantastic intuition that one can conceive of the activities that have unfolded in a place, *even thousands of years later*:

I am crouching in Pit One of the complex. It is dark because the custodians of the site have put a roof over the site, but four thousand years ago, at midday, on a day like today in bright summer light, the chalk walls would be dazzlingly intense. To increase this effect the miners built angled walls from the chalk spoil at the surface of the shaft to further reflect light down into the galleries. My first impressions are of the miners’ appreciation for the actual process of mining as an activity in itself, which they must have valued in their society above the flint that was mined. Also, I felt an awareness of their creation of an architecture, their carving out of underground spaces, and the separations and connections between these and the world above. Somewhat self-consciously, I crouch at the centre of the shaft and announce my short, prepared thesis, “organization appears only where existence is thwarted” (Dupont, 2007: 51).

The three key components of this exercise seem to be location in an unfamiliar and significant place (“I am crouching”), affective engagement with the history and arrangement of the space (“My first impressions [...] I felt an awareness ...”), and the conscious, explicit introduction of what would otherwise be an abstract “thesis” into that experience (“I [...] announce”). I suggest that in so doing an aleatory element is introduced into thought, a tendency that unfolds, at least in this case, in solitude. Perhaps the place and its intuitive reconstruction act as a sort of externalized primary process on speculation, inflecting or declining it. It is an analytic moment. Not: what does this thesis mean? But: what does it mean that *I* said it *here*? Dupont offers up the thesis to the mute walls of the pit. And then something happens: new thought. The “thesis” thickens, taking on a new consistency.

Organization appears only where existence is thwarted [...] And existence appears only where organization is thwarted. But is this because the appearance of existence-in-revolt is a negatively constituted movement (a mere inversion of what is, a substantiation of the possibilities of the form), or is it an indication of a crisis within organization, the breakdown of the holding/defining of the scene — or rather, is the recurrence of existence-counter-to-present-structure an intimation of organization yet to come? The question here concerns capture, and return — the possibility of getting back to a previous stage where the problems of any given structure, or structure itself, have yet to appear (ibid., 56).

What Dupont discovered, perhaps, is some way to imaginatively recreate precisely what is lost of prehistoric peoples — their anarchy: a kind of vanished attitude modelled anew. Dupont does not claim to speak the truth of those peoples. Who could ever claim to know what they thought? Or even if they experienced thought as a relatively autonomous faculty, the presupposition, by the way, of all our amusing contentions about “theory”? Rather, speculating in a place that is still somehow theirs, and letting the speculation remain what it is — a hallucination, ultimately — she or he moves to a speculative or archeological reconstruction of our own problems. Dupont is able to speculate on some Neolithic transformation from existence to organization (whatever else this

means, I suppose it has to do with the stabilization of proto-states, ritual structures, divisions of labour, etc.) insofar as she or he locates, imaginatively, analogous or even genealogically related elements in our present. Namely, the vast, unthought but available, background of the thesis! I might encapsulate that background by reference to a feeling: the terrible sense that the group one is in is becoming rigid, static, that a hierarchy, hierogamy, or hierophany is developing where initially only some sort of kinship or friendship existed. The place (here, the pit) concretizes, materializes, or grounds thought in a provisional, momentary, but remarkable way. Could this be the birth of the feral subject?

Elsewhere in the book Dupont quotes Krishnamurti: “Meditation is to find out if there is a field which is not already contaminated by the known” (ibid., 114). Whatever this statement could have meant in its original context, I understand Dupont to be suggesting that we always need new practices of thought, new contemplations, that habituate us to overcoming our profoundly limited common sense about what is human, what the human or its societies can do and be. The *field*, then, in this example is both the pit *and* the attitude or wishes one brings there — though the latter may only become evident in the pit.

There is, in short, a tentative anthropology here¹³, and it is overtly speculative and intuitive. The interest of its statements lies not in their truth-value but in their importance, their success — their felicity, as one says of a performative utterance. They are felicitous if they can meditatively restage some or all of a fantastic anthropogenetic moment in a present itself rendered fantastic.

Third Wild Style: Psychogeography

A third wild style bears as its name a Situationist term, which they defined as follows:

Psychogeography: the study of the specific effects of the geographical environment (whether consciously organized or not) on the emotions and behavior of individuals (Knabb, 2006: 52).

I mean it somewhat differently, however, since the question is not merely to understand effects, but to act on them, to generate other effects inasmuch as one becomes capable of experiencing places and spaces differently.¹⁴ One could view this style as a complex combination of the first (affirmation especially) and the second (though the speculative anthropology here refers not to the past but to a perspective on our world). A first simple form of Psychogeography could take up, for example, the long lists Kropotkin made of what in his present already manifested mutual aid: public libraries, the international postal system, cooperatives of every sort (Kropotkin, 1955: Chapters 7 & 8, *et passim*). Kropotkin argued that mutual aid is an evolutionary constant, as generic and vital as competition, or what was called the struggle for existence. But we would be mistaken if we thought his books, essays, speeches, etc. had as their only rhetorical mode the one perhaps most evident on a first reading, that of scientific proof. His *examples*, his repeated and lengthy enumerations of actual *cases* of mutual aid, offer up an entirely new world, an uncanny

¹³ That someone can speak to a wall is already a marvelous and irreducible fact of a future anarchist anthropology! This magical speech, the natural converse of speaking to oneself, also belongs to a future essay.

¹⁴ I might note here that the definition, in French, seems to be ambiguous as to whether it is the effects or the study of the effects that acts on our affective life. But the conjoined definition of “psychogeographical” makes clear that it is a question of the “direct action” of the milieu on affectivity. Compare *Internationale Situationniste* (1997: 13).

symptomatology of a familiar world. It is our world, seen through a new and clear lens.¹⁵ One could then travel to the places revealed in this new world, buildings or events, and meditate on the activity there so as to eventually grasp what is anarchist about them immediately and not potentially. I am referring to what is colloquially called “hanging out.” Going to the public library, for example, for no other reason than to witness what in it is anarchic — or, again, to a potluck. This practice involves another way of inhabiting familiar spaces. It brings out what in them is uncannily, because tendentially, anarchic. It multiplies our sites of action and engagement and could shape our interventions there.

Those interested could expand the range of this exercise, making the goal not only arrival at the sites of mutual aid (or other anarchic activities), but also the journey. Here again a Situationist term is relevant: the *dérive*, that “experimental behaviour” (Knabb, 2006: 52) of wandering across an urban space with no determinate destination. I suppose that if one has begun to master the affirmation of certain places as anarchic, one could begin expanding the range of the exercise, meditating as one walks or rides a bicycle or bus, affirming new forms of movement, escape, or evasion, as well as creative flights of fancy. Soon many places in urban space will emerge, detached from their everydayness, as remarkable: places of intensity, or of *virtual anarchy*. (I think here, for example, of the great significance some friends put on visiting certain garbage dumpsters.)

Indeed, it is likely that Fourier’s preferred examples may have emerged in just this way. Reading his finest descriptions of Harmony, we find innumerable *parades*. He plans Harmonian processions: “Parade Series: In a societary canton all the members of the industrial phalanx [...] are divided into 16 choirs of different ages; each choir is composed of 2 quadrilles, one of men and one of women, making a total of 32 quadrilles, 16 male and 16 female, each with its distinctive banners, decorations, officers and costumes, both for winter and summer” (Fourier, 1996: 293). It is strange and lovely to suppose that all of this began with the solitary tradesman Charles Fourier looking on as a military parade passed by, spontaneously inventing his version of this exercise by asking himself: what can we do with the passions set to work in this array? It seems these people like costumes, display, fanfare, and ordered group movements. How do these passions fit in Harmony, given that the constraint in thinking harmonically is to affirm every passion? Once the question is asked, our experience reveals the details to be meditatively rearranged. For Fourier, parades are not only great fun; they also presage the serial organization of the Combined Order. “All this pomp may be thought unnecessary to the cultivation of flowers and fruits, wheat and wine, etc., but baubles and honorific titles do not cost anything, and they are incitements to greater enthusiasm in the work of the Series” (ibid., 299). “You will come in the end to recognize that there are no bad or useless passions, and that all characteristics are good in themselves, that all passions must be intensified, not moderated” (ibid., 303). Psychogeography could show us where each passion, intensified, may bloom.

One night in the mid-nineties I had dinner with Peter Lamborn Wilson. We spoke about Fourier and he told me of a group of friends who had set off from New York into Canada in an expedition that had as its goal to trigger the birth of the Northern Crown, that “shining ring of light,” which,

¹⁵ Perhaps then a more relevant reference is not science but science fiction. As Deleuze wrote of Hume’s empiricism: “As in science fiction, one has the impression of a fictive, foreign world, seen by other creatures, but also the presentiment that this world is already ours, and these creatures, ourselves” (Deleuze, 2001: 35).

in Fourier's system, "will appear after two centuries of combined order" (ibid., 33–4). I do not remember all the details, but, since it has been fifteen years, and the Northern Crown has yet to emerge, I am led to wonder what this journey could have meant for its participants. I am reminded here of the great and catastrophic Tupi migrations of the sixteenth century documented by Hélène Clastres: ambiguous wanderings of whole peoples who abandoned a sad and sedentary way of life and danced off (literally!) in search of a land of immortality that they expected to find in the Andes or across the Atlantic (Clastres, 1995: 49–57). Or so it is said. We read of such journeys and perhaps conceive of them as pointless — fanatical, even. We suppose, perhaps, that they were primarily religious, missing what is remarkable about the absolute desertion of agricultural labour, marriage customs, etc. Religion might be the operative discourse, and prophetism the power mechanism, but the lived practice seems like something else entirely: "The quest for the Land-Without-Evil is [...] the active denial of society. It is a genuinely collective asceticism" (ibid., 56). Should we say the poor Tupi were duped by their own prophets? What if the journey were its own reason? How did the Tupi experience what Clastres calls the "auto-destruction" of their own societies? What could the wanderers Lamborn Wilson told me of have felt and thought as they made their way north?¹⁶

Interstices

Let me return to the question, "how do post-structuralist anarchists organize?" I have suggested that what perhaps went unthought in it was the presupposition of separation. In this case that meant that the prized goal of the game, the theory-practice intersection, ought to be (to embody or resemble) organizing or an organization. Here I recall Dupont's thesis: *organization appears where existence is thwarted*. Could we rewrite that last word with the phrase *separated from itself*?

Indeed, my three wild styles concern forms of existence that are more and less than organizations, or, to be direct, *organisms*, since in the unconscious hylomorphic background of the schema, theory is the soul, practice is the body, and progress is the organism's health. To maintain that anarchist meditations are interstitial is to propose that something or someone thrives and swarms ahead of, behind, among, inside of, and between the slow-moving theory-practice compounds that we call organizations. The vital question is: do organizations ever do anything at all? Or are they something like remnants, the clumsy carapaces of what has been and is already being done? David Hume wrote: "The chief benefit which results from philosophy arises in an indirect manner, and proceeds more from its secret insensible influence, than from its immediate application" (Hume, 2008: 104). *A secret insensible influence*: that is all I would claim for my wild styles. They are good practices, and good practice. They do not dictate action; action is its own reason and its own model. But they have had a long-standing, indirect, and insensible influence on what anarchists and many others in fact do.

Unlike a theory that purposely or accidentally posits an ideal state or a goal, they have no implicit or explicit teleology. I have long felt, and remain convinced, that there is nothing to be gained by positing a goal for action other than in the most irreducibly local sense (and even then!). Although I have my reasons for maintaining this near-metaphysical proposition, I will restrict myself here to underlining the contemporary phenomenon of non-ideological political actions,

¹⁶ Would it be going too far to write that they perhaps felt the Earth anew?

which could nearly all be called *tactics without strategies*. Or even: punctual acts in the course of detaching themselves from the tactical realm of militant and militarized politics. I prefer not to think such actions as practices in need of theoretical interpretation. If there is anything to praise in them, it is that these actions are wild experiments: ‘what happens when we do *this*?’ They install themselves, impossibly, I admit, on the side of *existence*, and attempt to remain there.

These wild styles ought, eventually, to put into question every political project — first, as project, and, again, as political.¹⁷ That is their virtue, or at least their contribution to virtue. Whatever effects they may or may not have, they exemplify *in thought* that aspect of anarchist practice called *direct action*. The famous and pathetic theses of the innate goodness of humans or of a future utopia have perhaps no value other than their role as themes for meditation and affirmation in the present. Hume, again: “The chief triumph of art and philosophy: it insensibly refines the temper, and it points out to us those dispositions which we should endeavour to attain, by a constant *bent* of mind, and by repeated *habit*” (ibid., 105). This sort of direct action, as it infuses our lives, may succeed or fail. To the extent that it succeeds, we are on the way to anarchy. To the extent that it fails, it succeeds as well, though in a more local way. We have bent our mind, as Hume wrote, and made life “amusing” (ibid., 113).¹⁸

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¹⁷ It is no coincidence that some anarchists and communists have recently posed the problem of what they provocatively call “anti-politics.”

¹⁸ Perhaps amusement is the only thing worth hoping for.

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Cynical Lessons

Alejandro de Acosta

2011, July

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“There were always men who practiced this philosophy. For it seems to be in some ways a universal philosophy, and the most natural.”

– Julian the Apostate

1

Some months ago, I discovered a series of books on ancient philosophies produced by the University of California Press, with lovely details of Baroque paintings reproduced on the covers. The titles read: *Stoicism*, *Epicureanism*, *Neoplatonism*, *Ancient Scepticism ... Cynics*. That last title immediately drew my attention: *Cynics* and not *Cynicism*. It turned out that *Cynics* makes explicit reference to anarchist ideas in a way that is both intelligent and important to at least some of us. (I will return to this intersection).

The choice of the title *Cynics* for William Desmond’s contribution was probably only meant to avoid confusion, but it also suggests a way to read the book so as to learn not merely *of* the Cynics but *from* them. Why is it not called *Cynicism*? True, from one point of view it is perfectly easy to say that there is Cynicism because we can list tenets held in common by Cynics. Textbooks, encyclopedias and dictionaries do this: in any of them we can learn that these people favored what Desmond calls “carefree living in the present”¹; and that, to accomplish it, they practiced a generalized rejection of social customs (Desmond catalogs this rejection in delightful detail: it includes customs concerning clothing, housing, diet, sex and marriage, slavery, work ...) in the direction of a simplification of life.² (This was somewhat more confusingly referred to as living in accord with nature).

But already in the ancient world, Diogenes Laertius, author of the great gossip-book of ancient philosophers, commented: “we will go on to append the doctrines which they held in common — if, that is, we decide that Cynicism is really a philosophy, and not, as some maintain, just a way of life.”³ One of the perpetual question marks hanging next to the Cynics’ status as philosophers is their common rejection of intellectual confusion. The term *typhos* (smoke, vapor) rightly emphasized by Desmond sums this up nicely. It was used, he writes, “to denote the delirium of popular ideas and conventions” (244). *Typhos* also included the “technical language” of philosophers: “the best cure” for it “is to speak simply” (127).

In any case, there is also certainly something called *cynicism*. Desmond consciously capitalizes the word when it is a matter of the school, and leaves it uncapitalized when it is a matter of what could be called the ambient attitude of a place and time — something people definitely live, but in no way choose or wish for. Something like that seems to be what Deleuze and Guattari were after in their recurring references to a special relation between capitalism and cynicism in the *Anti-*

¹ *Cynics*, 65. All further references in the essay.

² An account of this simplification as a de-culturing, perhaps de-civilizing process, perhaps more palatable to some, can be found in Nietzsche: “The Cynic knows the connection between the more highly cultivated man’s stronger and more numerous pains, and his profuse needs; therefore he understands that manifold opinions about beauty, propriety, seemliness, and delight must give rise to very rich sources of pleasure, but also to sources of discontent. In accordance with this insight, the Cynic educates himself retrogressively by giving up many of these opinions and withdrawing from the demands of culture. In that way, he achieves a feeling of freedom and of strengthening ...” *Human, All Too Human* § 275.

³ *Lives and Opinions of the Eminent Philosophers*, VI. 103.

Oedipus: cynicism as the correlate of modern bad conscience, “accompanied by a strange piety.”⁴ Cynicism, for them, is not so much the ideology of capitalism, as it is a congeries of behaviors and attitudes secreted by the capitalist socius, the apparent apathy that is ever becoming real, but never for all that passing into a reasoned or passionate way of life. It is rather the default lifestyle of those for whom a way of life (in any interesting sense of the phrase) is impossible.⁵

In light of this, I propose that perhaps the most interesting perspective is to say that there is no Cynicism, that there is cynicism, and that there are (or at least were) Cynics, as individuals.

Whereas the usual philosophical guidebook (and, worse, the usual philosophical conversation) starts with the Great Question “what is ...”, I propose instead the question “who is ...” Who is a Cynic? This question never disappears: even when we find great commonalities between different Cynics, we are still dealing with its familiar variant: “Who is the real Cynic?” We know that Cynics first appeared in the Greece of Socrates and Plato, and that there were Cynics well into Christian times. How do we know this? As with other ancient schools, its inventors, creators of a way of life, wrote nothing, or their writings are lost. We know of them through what is now called doxography: collections of sayings and opinions. Desmond recompiles and rearranges the doxographies charmingly, proving the point that if it is philosophy as a way of life that we are interested in, perhaps a few anecdotes about a singular character are as valuable as a short treatise or a letter to a friend. (I recall here Nietzsche’s gnomic proposition: “It is possible to present the image of a man in three anecdotes”⁶).

In behavior and intent, The Cynics we know of were “missionary” (as Pierre Hadot has put it).⁷ Their rejection of customs seems to have had an essentially performative, confrontational aspect. Desmond illustrates this as follows:

... the ancient Cynic could be stereotyped as a wild man who stood on the corner piercing passers-by with his glances, passing remarks to all and sundry, but reserving his bitterest scorn for the elites who parade by in purple and chariots, living unnatural lives, and trampling on the natural equality of man. (187)

Such confrontations in public places were one way in which the Cynic way of life was communicated. How does one become a Cynic? By example, obviously; by means of a model. Now, this anecdote tells of a more intimate communication:

Metrocles had been studying with Theophrastus, the successor to Aristotle and head of the Lyceum, a taxonomist and classificatory thinker with a specialty in botany. Once while declaiming Metrocles farted audibly and was so ashamed that he shut himself off from public view and thought of starving himself to death. But Crates

⁴ *Anti-Oedipus*, 225.

⁵ Question: does awareness matter in all this? Those who become aware of ambient cynicism and how it has affected or shaped their social personas: could they be on the way to becoming Cynics? It cannot be so simple. Deleuze and Guattari’s reference to “a strange piety” invites us to consider contemporary cynicism as the cynicism of the credulous. I do not have much of a taste for discussing capitalism as such, but it would be interesting to consider modern cynics in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense as those descended, though not without a series of sociocultural mutations, from those Hume called the superstitious. Precisely with this difference: modern cynics are superstitious, and they know it, and they are resigned to it.

⁶ *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, 25.

⁷ *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 108. The Cynic faces the crowd and “scold[s] to his heart’s content,” as Nietzsche

visited him, fed him with lupin-beans, and advanced various arguments to convince him that his action was not wrong or unnatural, and had been for the best in fact. Then Crates capped his exhortation with a great fart of his own. “From that day on Metrocles started to listen to Crates’ discourses and became a capable man in philosophy.”⁸ (28)

This intimate aspect is not emphasized in Desmond’s book, perhaps for lack of evidence. One could go a long ways in the direction of answering the question “Who can be a Cynic?” by considering the status of customs and laws from the perspective of how people have become capable of subverting them. I do not mean conferring a special status on transgression as a social or philosophical category, but rather becoming curious about who it is that grasps the instability of mores, conventions, laws and so on, and how they become capable of selectively ignoring them.

2

Consider then this couple: unusual public behavior / anecdote documenting the same. As Desmond points out, a typical *chreia* or anecdote related an action followed by a witty, insightful, or bluntly truthful utterance. It would seem that the anecdote was simultaneously a spoken rhetorical device and a genre of literature, both in close relation to what is best about gossip. There were many compilations of such anecdotes in the ancient world. It is not hard to imagine that these anthologies were compiled so as to amuse the curious; but they could also have brought about, at a distance and thanks to a certain sort of reading, the transmission of a model that public harangues and private obscenities can communicate face to face, body to body. I mean the imitation of unusual behaviors, and, more importantly, a stimulation to invent new ones relevant to one’s own life. This literary transmission of the Cynic life has surely happened many times and in many ways.

Long after the first generations came lengthier written texts either advocating the Cynical way of life or at least presenting it in a favorable light. But by then the writers’ commitment to the way of life was in question. It is one version of the question “Who is the real Cynic?” Desmond discusses, though does not promote, a common distinction between original “hard” Cynics (Diogenes, Crates, Hipparchia) who lived the life and derivative “soft” Cynics, who, fascinated by it, merely wrote about it (Lucian, Dio Chrysostom). It is, of course, as a distant echo of this supposed merely literary presence of the school that the term “cynic” reappears as an ordinary noun, and eventually as a pejorative term, bringing the question “who?” full circle from punctual designation to anonymous epithet.

One example of the richness of this question’s persistence in the literary transmission of Cynicism is Lucian’s *The Death of Peregrinus*. Desmond mentions it briefly; I will take it up in some detail. In this satire we learn of the life and spectacular death of the “ill-starred” Peregrinus the Cynic.⁹ As the satire opens, Theagenes, a fearful, crying Cynic (?) gives a hoary speech in praise of Peregrinus; then a nameless, laughing man mounts the same platform to tell the truth. (This man

puts it (*Human, All Too Human*, § 275.)

⁸ The last sentence is cited from Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of the Eminent Philosophers*, VI.

⁹ Lucian, “The Death of Peregrinus,” in *Selected Dialogues*, 74.

is not identified as a Cynic). He dismisses Theaganes' praise as well as his tears. Instead he offers his laughter, and another perspective on Peregrinus. He details, among other things, how Peregrinus started life as a good-for-nothing, becoming a parricide in exile after strangling his own father for no reason other than the inconvenience of caring for an old man. In exile Peregrinus eventually transformed himself, managing to become a well-respected Christian leader. As such, he was imprisoned, and received all of their support. Once freed, he betrayed the Christians. Setting off again, he became a Cynic and trained in ascetic exercises. These were the *ponoi*, practices Cynics would use to loosen the bonds of custom: Peregrinus shaved half his head, smeared his face with mud, masturbated in public, beat and was beaten with a fennel cane, etc. Eventually his love of glory and attention led him to his famous self-immolation, the event that Lucian ruthlessly mocks as a failed apotheosis. Having publically announced it years in advance, Peregrinus killed himself by jumping into an enormous pyre before countless witnesses at the Olympic festival. This was purportedly done to show others that they need not fear death. Lucian, now present as the narrator, places himself, laughing, at the scene of the pyre, describing Peregrinus and Theagenes as pitiful actors. Lucian is not only unimpressed: he calls the witnesses "idiots," and retires. In the scenes of the aftermath, Lucian converses with curious passers-by and latecomers, answering their idle questions with preposterous and contradictory exaggerations.

It seems that, for Lucian, to say one is a Cynic, even to have trained in the ascetic exercises, means nothing special if in the present one continues to demonstrate vanity. And nothing could be more vain than capitalizing on one's own suicide by announcing it years in advance. Here Lucian, who never called himself a Cynic, shows himself capable of wearing that mask in his satire. He addresses an interlocutor:

... I can hear you crying out, as you well might: "Oh, the stupidity! Oh, the thirst for renown! Oh —", all the other things we tend to say about them. Well, you can say all this at a distance and much more safely; but I said it right by the fire, and even before that in a large crowd of listeners. Some of these became angry, the ones who were impressed by the old man's lunacy; but there were others who laughed at him too. Yet I can tell you I was nearly torn to pieces by the Cynics... [10]

The entire story revolves around the question: "who?" Lucian's Peregrinus cynically moves from low-life to moral Christian to ascetic Cynic to vainglorious blowhard. Is this progression Cynical? Or is Lucian's laughter more of a Cynic effect, however he may have lived?

Desmond, for his part, suggests that much of Lucian's satire may be a "hatchet job," such as the account of the parricide, for example. Considering this takes us one turn further into the maze of the question: "who?" What if it is Lucian, the writer, who is the vainglorious one, envious of Peregrinus' performance, its practical philosophy? What if, for example, Peregrinus had an excellent reason to take his own life, and opted to use his death to teach a final lesson, one the results of which he could not live to see? Could that not be the opposite of vanity? For me this ambiguity manifests a tension between way of life and philosophy, or, again, between living according to nature and a missionary urge to harangue others to do the same.¹⁰

Lucian calls Peregrinus an actor, his suicide a "performance." Discussing the history of the well-worn metaphor of the world as theater, the philologist Ernst Robert Curtius traces it back

¹⁰ A fascinating discussion of these sorts of reversals, based on a famous anecdote involving Diogenes the Cynic and Alexander the Great, appears in Part 4, "Friar," of Michel Serres' *Detachment*.

to comments in Plato's *Laws* about humans as puppets of the gods, or to a phrase in his *Philebus* about the "tragedy and comedy of life." But then he notes: "In the popular lectures on philosophy ('diatribes') of the Cynics, the comparison of man to an actor became a much-used cliché."¹¹ This story of origins only becomes interesting when we read between the lines in Curtius, noticing that it must have been the Cynics who began using this metaphor without reference to the divine, and perhaps not as a metaphor at all. Simply put: everyone is an actor. Desmond writes: "if the self is substantial and secure in itself, then, like a good actor, it can put on and off many masks, playing many roles without dissipating or compromising itself, just as a good actor can appear in many guises while remaining the same person beneath" (182).¹² Indeed, the reception of this idea, metaphor or not, which Curtius traces from the Romans through the Middle Ages to Shakespeare, Baltasar Gracián, and Calderón, may be studied along at least two axes: who takes the world-theater to be a divine place? Who does not? And: who says is there is anything behind the actor's masks? Who does not? About Lucian and Peregrinus, Desmond writes:

Peregrinus was rightly named Proteus because he was as adaptable and many-masked as the Old Man of the Sea. He took many shapes and professed not to be changed by any. Lucian scoffs, but Peregrinus' own intention in his last "role" as a latter-day Hercules may have been to demonstrate that external flames and a melting body cannot harm "the god within." (182)

That would be the case for saying that there is someone behind the mask. Something like Lucian's laughter would be the case for saying that there is not, or that what is behind the mask is another mask, or that it does not really matter... Now we might have begun to understand what is vital in the couple behavior/anecdote. It is a tension, an intimate challenge, a kind of existential dare, that can only be resolved or transformed in one's own life and body.

3

I have mentioned the list of titles in the series: *Stoicism, Epicureanism, Neoplatonism, Ancient Scepticism ... Cynics*. When I gazed upon the gathered books I felt I was not merely looking at a list of didactic books aimed at a curious and intelligent student. I also felt that I had before me a series of manuals, or at least fragments of manuals concerning ways of life that are perhaps still available. (Notice that someone claiming that the Cynic way of life is no longer available could be accused of taking a cynical position). Grasped as manuals they suggest a different sort of curiosity, and perhaps another aspect of intelligence as well. I have advocated for a pragmatic use of certain anthropology books along the same lines, as manuals concerning the organization and disorganization of social and cultural life, available to all. This sort of reading is obviously also in some sense a willful misappropriation, or at least a misreading; something else than the conventional use of such texts. It has two facets: the patience of engagement with the text (one

¹¹ *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 138.

¹² This is one of the few places where Desmond seems to go too fast, overstepping his doxographical task. I find no correlate in the texts he discusses to any such substantial concept of the self, which I take to be a more recent invention. The same problem occurs in the definition of *typhos* that I cited above: "...insubstantial 'smoke' in relation to the self and its present experiences, which alone can be known and possessed." For me the highly abstract concept of the self is more likely to be another example of *typhos*.

cannot simply call it plagiarism or ‘stealing ideas’); the impatience, or maybe hurried patience, concerning whatever in it is significant enough to draw into one’s life as an urgent problem, challenge, or question ...

That said, I would like to consider that the Cynic way of life is impossible. Maybe no one could embody their way of life perfectly, avoiding the ambiguities brought about by the public aspect of the example or the harangue. Or at least, if someone did, it was in a way that was inimitable and so incommunicable. Historically speaking, such perfect Cynics must have disappeared. I recall the first day I spoke in public of the Cynics. One of my strange teachers was present; he said something like: “What about the Cynics who were such perfect masters that they disappeared?” At the time, I did not know how to respond. Perhaps I was confused. I now find his question calming, in two perhaps contradictory ways. First, if we suppose that the real Cynics disappeared, we can be untroubled about finding real Cynics; we can assume that we never will. The use of the question “Who is a Cynic?” is modified accordingly: we will expect to find masks, semblances, references. Imperfect embodiment is still embodiment, and literature is still (is very much so!) life.

Secondly, however, one can certainly disappear *to* the historical record without disappearing *from* the historical record. One’s life can just as much be expressed in an anecdote as hidden within it. (Or both, which is what I suppose Nietzsche meant: the best anecdotes reveal and conceal at once. Otherwise we are collecting bad gossip, trivia, distractions, *typhos*). This idea of disappearing (of secrecy, or of clandestinity) could be used to finally dispose of the seriousness behind the question “Who is the real Cynic?”, dissolving the distinction between “hard” and “soft” Cynics: the first might have written all manner of things, an exquisite and singular literature which they destroyed or shared with a very few; the latter might have undertaken countless ascetic exercises, from the ridiculous to the grotesque, but opted not to record them and disallowed others from reporting on them. All of this is intimately related to the problem of vanity at stake between Lucian and his character Peregrinus; it also shows much of what is at stake in the difference between ancient or medieval ways of life and our so-called lifestyles.

4

I conclude by discussing the interesting references to anarchist ideas in *Cynics*. This has great interest for me and mine. One of my companions, when I showed him, patted me on the back and said something like: “See, now our movements are points of reference for everything, even for a book on ancient philosophy!” At which point I cringed twice, once for the phrase “our movements” and again for the pat on the back, that little victorious sentiment ... I do not think that is exactly what is interesting here. That Desmond makes the reference is indeed noteworthy, especially given the clearly pedagogical intent of his book.¹³ But at the same time, that is not a reason for us to be comforted; rather, it is a matter of curiosity, a reason to think differently about who we suppose we are and what we suppose we are doing. I mean that we could provisionally accept the connection he makes, taking everything he writes about the Cynics as an intimate challenge.

When he calls the Cynics anarchists, Desmond confesses this is just “the most convenient label” for them. Of course:

¹³ His reference in making this connection ultimately seems to be Kropotkin’s Britannica article of 1911 on

... they renounced the authority of officialdom and of social tradition: not marrying; not claiming citizenship in their native or adopted cities; not holding political office; not voting in the assembly or courts; not exercising in the gymnasium or marching with the city militia; and not respecting political leaders ... To be free is to have no master, whether that master be a god, political assembly, magistrate, general, or spouse. (185)

But Desmond thinks, as many or most do, of anarchism as a form of politics, and so restricts the Cynic-anarchist connection to the rejection of certain forms of political organization. On this side of the question, he generalizes to the point of grotesque error: it is not true that, as he seems to think, all anarchists think humans are fundamentally good, or that life without the state is better because it is more natural than life under it. On the other hand, calling Cynics anarchists is compelling in that they did not form parties or foment revolutions. So it is precisely to those anarchists most suspicious of such activities that this comparison will be interesting.

For me, the import of this is to show the tense relation, or non-relation, between the Cynics' concern with ethics (a way of life) above all, and the various political stages of the world, with all of their *typhos*. One could anachronistically call them a subculture; this would be useful precisely to the degree that it allows us to focus on how they both maintained a way of life and did not entirely disappear in the doing. That is: it is arguably the public aspect of their way of life that brought them to these various platforms.

Desmond does not call the Cynics anarchists and leave it at that; he also suggests that the same Cynics could be called democrats, kings, or cosmopolitans. Indeed, for what does "carefree living in the present" *especially* have to do with the State or its rejection? Instead of asking: "what is Cynic politics?", we can ask: "who is the Cynic when she does this, when he says that ...?" Let us say provisionally that the Cynics were playing with, playing at politics, insofar as its cloudy stages are also so many platforms from which to launch the perhaps inevitable diatribe. They were democrats, because in so doing they discovered a way of simultaneously inhabiting and resisting their dominant political environment, pushing it in a radically egalitarian or at least populist direction (Desmond reminds us that for many "democracy" essentially meant "rule by the poor"(188).) But the democratic assembly is also a place to practice comic wit! And the funniest thing is to call oneself a king. Well, why not? It is much funnier than calling oneself an anarchist or a democrat! Cynics are kings in rags (57).¹⁴ As with democracy, Desmond suggests

"Anarchism," in which Zeno of Citium is given as an early inspiration. Zeno, founder of the Stoic school, was a student of Crates the Cynic. (It would be tremendously satisfying to discover a story about the two involving farts or something comparable, to embarrass the seekers of noble origins.)

¹⁴ As Dio Chrysostom put it, alluding to the figure of Odysseus. In his "Fourth Discourse on Kingship," Dio imagines a version of the anecdotal dialogue between Diogenes the Cynic and Alexander the Great in which he prepares the idea of "kings in rags" by undermining the conventional understanding of monarchy. "And Alexander said: 'Apparently you do not hold even the Great King to be a king, do you?' And Diogenes with a smile replied, 'No more, Alexander, than I do my little finger.' 'But shall I not be a great king,' Alexander asked, 'when once I have overthrown him?' 'Yes, but not for that reason,' replied Diogenes; 'for not even when boys play the game to which the boys themselves give the name 'kings' is the winner really a king. The boys, anyhow, know that the winner who has the title of 'king' is only the son of a shoemaker or a carpenter — and he ought to be learning his father's trade, but he has played truant and is now playing with the other boys, and he fancies that now of all times he is engaged in a serious business — and sometimes the 'king' is even a slave who has deserted his master. Now perhaps you kings are also doing something like that: each of you has playmates ..." (46-48)

that what we have here is an intelligent exaggeration, a pushing to the limit, of another ancient commonplace: that the best should rule.

The poor Cynic can claim to be a “king” because in his wild, unconventional life he has recovered all the natural virtues: courage, temperance, simplicity, freedom, and, most of all, *philanthropia*. As “kings” who try to lead people to a life “according to nature,” they are acting only in the people’s best interest. They alone love mankind, and so in comparison with them, Sardanapallus, Xerxes, Philip, Alexander, Antigonus, Seleucus, Ptolemy, Nero, Vespasian, Domitian and the rest are only gangsters. (199)

They are, or aspire to be, monarchs in the only non-deluded sense of the word. And cosmopolitans? It seems that at least some of them *did* use this term. And here again we have what seems to be a provocation. Since the *polis* was the only available sense of “state,” to claim to be a citizen of the cosmos is to express oneself through paradox. “How can one be a *citizen* of the totality and its vast spaces? Can one make the cosmos one’s *home*? ... Diogenes implies that only the Cynic wanderer is truly at home anywhere” (205). I conclude that this mixture of paradoxical and provocative attitudes is more interesting than opting for any one Cynic politics.

Keeping this in mind, what happens when we return to the initial connection and make it operate in the other direction, asking: are anarchists Cynics? Could anarchists (really) be Cynics?¹⁵ As with other practices or ideas that interest me, for example those of the Situationists and Nihilists (there might even be people clever enough to play this game with the word “communist”!), I feel the need to keep asking the question “who is ...?” which is, among other things, the perspectival question of the true and false.¹⁶ This is not a matter of identity or identification, of clarifying or purifying our essence. It means, among other things, asking if there are anarchists who, instead of considering their activities solely as a politics (“anarchism”), understand what they do as aspects of a way of life distributed unevenly between political activities in the ordinary sense, micropolitical activities, and anti- or non-political activities — even inactivities? Are there anarchists who experience their lives as the ultimate criterion, instead of some goal or cause? If so, they will find plenty of interest in a manual entitled *Cynics*.

Yes, someone could read this book as a manual; someone could begin a revaluation of anarchist activities stimulated by the example of the Cynics. In that direction, I conclude with an outline of topics for immediate discussion and implementation:

1. What is *typhos* to you? I think of this as a promising alternative to terms such as “ideology” or “spectacle.” Rather than deploying a a true-false, reality-appearance dichotomy (the starting point of so many boring conversations), to me *typhos* suggests an intimate,

¹⁵ There are multiple ways to understand this question. It might be interesting to compare it, and its possible answers, with a topic of scholarly controversy discussed by Desmond: was Jesus a Cynic? (*Cynics*, 211-216). Naturally, the mere question would disturb the average Christian: if Jesus was a Cynic, then the entirety of the Christian religion is an colossal misunderstanding at best, a vile imposture at worst. Does the correlation of Cynics and anarchists similarly unground “anarchism”?

¹⁶ The parallels are obvious: there are vague epithets, a noun and an adjective, for cynics and anarchists alike; there are Cynics and anarchists, and there may or may not be Cynicism or Anarchism, depending on who you ask. But “who is ...” is also the question of possible and impossible positions: “Who can be a Cynic?” So, for example, in the aphorism cited above, Nietzsche writes that the gentle Epicureans had the same perspective as the Cynics: “between

personal, singular limit. It is the limit of my interest in the world, in the ideas and experiences of others, and in some of my own ideas and experiences as well. “Beyond this limit,” I can make a habit of thinking, “all is smoke, vapor, *typhos*.” Ah, the destestable convergence of the uninteresting and the confusing ...

2. What are your forms of ascetic exercises, your *ponoi*? I know many people who have shaved half of their head, some who are dirty enough to be said to have caked mud on themselves, a few who have masturbated in public ... what kinds of situations can you get yourselves into that exemplify, not in principle but in fact, detachment from what you wish to detach yourself from? Instead of contending with others about interpretations of the world, you could bend your urge to compete in the direction of increasingly absurd or confrontational public acts. It is stimulating to imagine how, violating before me a custom concerning sexuality, you could provoke me to go and violate one concerning diet or work.
3. In thinking through the first topic and living out the second, *who* can truly describe themselves as “laughing a lot and taking nothing seriously?” (65)¹⁷

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Footnotes

[10]Lucian, 75.

the two there is usually only a difference in temperament.”

¹⁷ The quote is from Lucian.

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How the Stirner Eats Gods

Alejandro de Acosta

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About his philosophical nickname

The author of the fine book *The Ego and its Own* was a man whose forehead sprouted a name: *Stirner* refers to his great brow. There is something charming about the fact that this book was signed with a pseudonym - this book that insists to the death on irreducible, irreparable uniqueness. As if one's proper name is never remarkable enough, and every Ego requires the artifice of a nickname to become a Unique signature. *Stirner* is his philosophical nickname, the signature of an unknown visage¹ who dedicates his book to his sweetheart, then passes it to us in all ambiguity and says: *use it*.

About his allergy to the Cause

I have previously taken the liberty of calling Max Stirner an anarchist.² In the context of that discussion, as perhaps with most discussions of *The Ego and its Own*, I suppose that it worked. I do not doubt that he belongs to our genealogy. In the long run, however - in the name of a truly perspectival theory - I think one might understand Stirner as an anarchist and as something else as well. For there is no doubt that, for many, Anarchism is a Cause. What I have to say here is a gift to those who wish to betray that Cause.

To put Stirner in dialogue with our present, we have to get past a certain caricature of his thought (a caricature for which he is partly responsible, due mostly to his excessive prose style). Should you care to read the usually short section on Stirner to be found in introductory books on anarchism, you will find more or less this: Stirner, writing before Marx and Nietzsche, made a radical vindication of the freedom of the individual against all powers: the church, the state, all forms of authority. He did so in a way that was inspiring for many but at the same time could go no farther than a parodic exaggeration of liberal individualism. What you get is a vague, almost mythical, image, of someone who is completely out for him- or herself, and whose relations to all others are conditional on their own benefit. Benefit is understood in a typical capitalist, economic way: property and individual sovereignty. In a way that simultaneously includes and excludes Stirner's aberrant claim to ownness, this an imaginary that associatively gathers around it; it is dubbed "individualism." Naturally, this image presupposes the individual self (as psyche and as body) as a metaphysical given. Modern-day, free-market libertarian, anarcho- capitalist types seem to be inspired directly or indirectly by this caricature.

Now, I would not say that there is nothing in Stirner that opens onto such a caricature. After all, there are many caricatures in *The Ego and its Own*. And to each Ego her Own! If I set it all aside, though, and try to summon for myself his intuition in all its vertiginous danger, it seems to me that he must have had something rather different in mind than the stultifying conclusion that the greatest example of an egoist would be something like a Wall Street banker. As if he or she who is only out for themselves and wants to appropriate everything is exemplified by one of our great privatizers, those who attempt to turn as much of the world as possible into private property. Of course those little men and women are egoists. But so is everyone else: "Unconsciously and involuntarily we all strive towards ownness." "All your doings are *unconfessed*, secret, covert, and

¹ It is additionally appropriate that there are no paintings or photographs of Stirner. There is, of course, that delightfully crude sketch made by Engels from memory - nostalgic, perhaps, for the company of the Free.

² "Two Styles of Anti-Statist Subjectivity."

concealed egoism.”³ Yes, the real question is (and do please be kind enough to laugh at this): who will *confess*? We need better examples, far stranger examples; we need to finally meet or at least envision *confessed* egoists. We need, in all, another perspective.

This second perspective sets out from a consideration of the Ego as a kind of cipher or variable, something fundamentally unknown. The first thing we know of it is its allergy to any Cause that can be resolved into an Ism. Its characteristic activity—in Stirner’s time, in our own, perhaps for all time—is the *schism* in which one breaks with the Cause. I will have to come back, and soon, to this inadequately adequate denomination, Ego. For the moment let us play a provisional dialectical game, and suppose that Ego = x is defined in opposition to the Cause.

Cause, or, in German, *Sache*: either has one of those amusingly long dictionary entries which might make us laugh at the game of definition. Playing this game for a moment, we might read under *Sache* thing, object, article, cause, action, legal case... and so we might learn what game Stirner was playing. These are all things that, though they may seem to be objects of the subject that I am, are eminently marks or signs of my subordination to a greater subject. We know that it is a subject because that is how it appears in our speech. It is greater than me inasmuch as it is imagined as transcendent or eternal. It seems to constitute me in mediate relation to things and actions, by means of constituting me in immediate relation to itself, to its Cause.

I will rehearse the enumeration of causes in the delightful opening rant of the book, entitled “All Things are Nothing to Me.” Stirner opens *The Ego and its Own* in the first person: “What is not supposed to be my concern!” (5). What follows is a list of Causes that I am asked to accept as my own: the Cause of God, the Cause of Humanity, the Cause of the State, etc, etc. In each case I am asked to identify with a Cause alien to my interest. The terms of this offer are hardly delicate. Stirner observes: what we can say about God is that God is God’s main concern. What we can say about Humanity is that Humanity is Humanity’s main concern. What we can say about the State is that the State is the State’s main concern. But inexplicably I find myself in this statement: “I myself am my concern” (7). My Cause will be my own. I note with interest that Stirner gives *no explanation* as to how he or any of us might come to make such a claim. Now please read those statements again and observe for yourself. The relation of *being its own main concern* is said of an entity that is totally hypothetical. More precisely: imaginary. Stirner never gives us any reason to believe that there is God or Humanity beyond the quasiexistence that constellations of fixed ideas in the imagination might be said to have. As for the State, according to a definition that ought to be familiar to anarchists, it can be clearly shown to be the modes of behavior of those who live in accord with that profoundly inadequate constellation of ideas, that Cause.⁴ So, through a more circuitous route, the same difference. None. A paradoxical question: if all of these Causes-Subjects are imaginary, am *I* imaginary? What was I before this constitutive event, before this process began? What am I once I break with the Cause? Was I ever, can I ever be again, its orphan and its atheist?⁵

In the sacred and sacrificial logic of every Cause except perhaps my own, the imaginary greater subject (God, Humanity, the State, etc, etc.), the one that defines me, forcibly constitutes me in mediate relation, not only to things and actions, but above all to myself. One could say, as Debord

³ *The Ego and its Own*, 316,149. All other references in parentheses in the essay.

⁴ I am alluding, of course, to Landauer’s famous description: “The State is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of human behavior; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently.” Cited in Buber, *Paths in Utopia*, 46. Goldman and many others have given similar accounts.

⁵ As has been said of a person free of myth, or of the unconscious. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 58.

did that its operation is separation, the introduction of a “scission within human beings.”⁶ But that cannot be the whole story. I agree with Stirner that there is no Man: Humanity is another Cause. Scission or separation within what, then? Just this cipher we call the Ego, this variable that names not generic humanity but individual human bodies. Individuals? Humans? I will come back to individuals and humans.

The imagination does not speak. *Someone* has spoken. He or she is a representative of the Cause, or wants you to think so. He does not speak in his own name. She says she speaks for the Cause. He shares, without invitation, his imagination. She insists that you accept her gift of words, sometimes even of organs.⁷ As David Hume once put it: “In vain, by pompous phrase and passionate expression, each recommends his own pursuit, and invites the credulous hearers to an imitation of his life and manners.”⁸ *Someone* says (usually repeats) to you that you must take this Cause as your own; that without it, your life is meaningless. “Every man must have something that is more to him than himself” (254). Stirner implies that, in such moments, you might accept, even embrace, the possibility of meaninglessness. He does not assume that, now that the God Cause, the State Cause, etc, etc; is no longer my own, I immediately know what I am doing, or what to do next. To assume my Cause as my own does not mean that I know what I am or what I want to do.⁹ I can say that I will make my Cause my own, but I may not know what that means. I might trip up in my imaginary self-constitution. Not knowing is not only possible but probable. Someone sure of the next step has probably just switched Causes. Sometimes that is called progress.

Towards the end of the opening rant, Stirner affirms: “If God, if mankind, as you affirm, have substance enough in themselves to be all in all to themselves, then I feel that I shall still less lack that, and that I shall have no complaint to make of my ‘emptiness.’ I am not nothing in the sense of emptiness, but I am the creative nothing, the nothing out of which I myself as creator create everything” (7). His rhetoric is fascinating: *If, as you affirm ...* - but why grant anything to this interlocutor? If, as the credulous affirm, *then I feel...* Nothing has been proven. What, then, is Stirner evoking? What is this creative nothing out of which I myself as creator create everything? What is this inexplicable and perilous moment wherein I subtract myself from a Cause that appears to give meaning to my life from beyond? (I repeat that this is first and foremost to subtract myself from the gift of meaning offered or imposed by one who imagines the Cause as their own.) It includes the possibility of being nothing or of doing nothing. This experience of nothingness recurs regularly in *The Ego and its Own*. But the crucial difference between nothing in the sense of emptiness and the creative nothing is that the first is not-Cause (to be rid of it, or *freedom*) and the second is beyond any serious relation to Causes (to be myself, or *ownness*), not defined in terms of contradiction or breaking-with. This is a gesture of autonomy - to speak in one’s own name. But, rhetorical disavowals aside, the name is empty; it is a mask. So maybe the dialectical game ends here.

Gilles Deleuze gives Stirner a special place in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, as the last gasp of dialectics, its parody- moment for that Free generation. “The dialectic cannot be halted until

⁶ *Society of the Spectacle*, § 20, translation modified. Debord’s concept of spectacle usefully illustrates the social machines through which such imaginary subjects come to appear real.

⁷ The idea of a gift of organs was suggested in a different context by Jean-Francois Lyotard. I am thinking of all of the nonverbal ways in which we are invited or seduced to join a Cause.

⁸ “The Platonist,” 92.

⁹ The event of breaking with the Cause is not itself a Cause: however, it is common enough that instances of

I become a proprietor. Even if it means ending up in nothingness.”¹⁰ Briefly, it’s that Stirner implodes the dialectical mechanism, finally having done with breaking- with, absolutely negating negation, leaving nothing. “Stirner is the dialectician who reveals nihilism as the truth of the dialectic.”¹¹ This in the sense that if God, Humanity, and the other Subjects-Causes do not exist, I have no grounds to assert that I do merely because I have scornfully reduplicated the broken logic according to which those more credulous than I superstitiously suppose they do. Deleuze is right: “Stirner is too much of a dialectician to think in any other terms but those of property, alienation, and reappropriation - but too exacting not to see where this thought leads: to the ego which is nothing, to nihilism.”¹² But (and this is the crucial question): *which* nihilism? *Whose*? The problem Deleuze set himself was to enlist Nietzsche in an escape from dialectical reasoning, with all of its sloppy logic and its priestly morality. For my part, I want to meet today’s confessed egoists and nihilists. Especially since they seem to have responded intelligently to the fact that our present evidences ever more images of catastrophe, of absolute annihilation.¹³ (Three provisional figures of catastrophe in our time are nuclear warfare, environmental devastation, and the company of people with no essence.) Perhaps there is no Nihilism, just these curious nihilists.

About the Unique and the Id

If we are able to grasp what is parodic in Stirner, if Ego is not a Cause in the same sense as the others, an Ego can be neither an object nor a subject. It must be a process. Any Ego has, perhaps as its beginning, certainly and repeatedly as part of its process, a creative nothing. The process is not a process that fills the void. It is rather an atomic, irreversible way of acting in a void: these acts are called appropriating, misappropriating, disappropriating, expropriating, finding, losing... Translating the book’s title literally, we understand what it underlines>Not *The Ego and its Own*; rather something like *The Unique and Its Property*,¹⁴ For the funny Latin- English term Ego translates *Ich*, “I,” not *Einzig*, “Unique.” It is not easy to say Unique the way that we say I. What we might hear in this awkwardness is a way to say singularity, expressed appropriately, perhaps even poetically, by replacing a pronoun with an adjective. I am not abstract me but myself with all of my qualities - my properties. Unique. The paradoxical vindication of my Cause as my own says that nothing can replace the singularity that I am or that I have. That I call I. That I cannot exchange. Ego is the name of the “unutterable” (275), unnamable Unique.

Stirner was one of those few philosophers who are more interested in having than being. Probably the most succinct way to describe this Unique, this Ego, is to say that I am exactly what I can appropriate *right now*, what I can say is proper to me *at this moment*. As though in my process I affirm a series of parts of me as Unique (my properties) and disavow another series as all

such breaks are eventually memorialized as part of a new Cause.

¹⁰ *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 160.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹² *Ibid.*, 162. Maurizio Lazzarato once made the same claim for the Situationists: in *their* generation, they took the dialectic to its limits: “It is the honor of the situationists to have led the dialectic right to its point of disintegration, within the impasse that restrained it, beyond Marx.” I cite from my unpublished translation of “Hurlements en faveur du situationnisme.”

¹³ Michael Hardt has written some profoundly lucid pages on the relation between absolute annihilation (what some Scholastics called *pars destruens*) and the dissolution of dialectics in the introduction to his Gilles Deleuze.

¹⁴ One can find some remarks along similar lines in Hakim Bey’s *communiqué* “Black Crown and Black Rose: Anarcho-Monarchism and Anarcho-Mysticism.” Some of what I write below on the Id also echoes this fine missive.

those things through which I am possessed by an alien Cause. What is left is ownness. "My own I remain" (143). This corresponds exactly with Spinoza's formula: *aquiescentia in se ipso*.

Keeping in mind what I have written about dialectics, clearly there is something very strange happening in Stirner with regard to having, with the concept of property. On one side there is a language that seems to parrot good old free-market capitalism: there is an individual who must appropriate to survive. On the other side, we find the claim that this appropriation is what is going to *dispossess* me. It is not only what is going to free me from having been possessed by these Causes but also the very event of my self-affirmation. This has to do not with survival but with life. Simply put, it is not about things, but about actions or events that I may affirm as me or as mine. Stirner offers many wonderful images of how we allow constellations of inadequate or fixed ideas to rule us. He uses the language of ghosts. "The whole world is haunted." (36); "Ghosts in every comer!" Credulous, we are "enthusiastic" and possessed (48).¹⁵ The desire, then, when I proclaim my Cause, when I affirm myself, is to be a dispossessed Ego, playing in, wandering about, the fields of ownness.

For some of us Ego has a psychoanalytic resonance. It fits in the infamous second Freudian topology (that of *The Ego and the Id*) between the Id and the Super-Ego. If we were to redraw this picture, to playfully illustrate Stirner with Freud's topology, it would look something like this: the Super-Ego is the Causes. That is to say, everything with which I stupidly or superstitiously identify, precisely the litany of ways I am possessed. It is what I have to get rid of, what I have to break with, free myself from. But the Id, the *It* in me, the source of bizarre impulses, that, for Freud, I cannot ever quite identify with, is, for Stirner, just as much me as the Ego. The Unique affirms the Ego and Id indistinctly. Stirner writes, clearly and often, that there is no interest in saying I am more the rational series than the irrational series. I am "an abyss of unregulated and lawless impulses, desires, wishes, passions, a chaos without guiding light or star!" (146). *Chaos ergo sum*.

For the sake of discussion, I propose a distinction between two concepts of Self in Stirner, corresponding roughly to unconfessed and confessed egoism. The first would be everything we discover by thinking about the self as a subject or object of possession: it is what I undergo when I carelessly accept the gift of words or organs. Indebted, I mistake another's Cause for my own, and I do so in my most intimate sense of belonging: to God, to the nation, to some moral code, to a community that takes good care of me. (Notice that these tend to involve what is called Truth). I take myself to be substantial and full; I draw meaning from the identification-operation. Clearly this involves one or more fundamental self-deceptions, manifest as a separation in the Unique. This is a historical and contingent Self inasmuch as nobody chooses what he or she is possessed by. At least at first.

Another sense of Self could be called transhistorical and creative. I am thinking again about the process, about what Stirner could have intended by writing "I am the creative nothing." One outcome of the dispossession, of what one could call the exorcism, would be to realize that the self is nothing. To take the intimacy of belonging to its degree zero. That is, if I am only what I can possess or affirm, this never excludes the possibility that I have nothing or can affirm nothing.

¹⁵ Stirner's occasional references to enthusiasm are important. First, they align his thought with a philosophy, stretching back at least to the Enlightenment, that connected revolutionary activities with the dangerous fanaticism they so often reproduce. Second, they underline that the haunting of the world is not merely a matter of minds and ideas. Possession has a strong affective component, and perhaps not even a component. Perhaps all we are thinking through here are forms of the transmission of sadness.

All the courage in Stirner's book, all of its scattershot nobility, has to do with accepting this possibility. It is a kind of psychic mortality: the fact is that the psyche can vanish and a point of view, one or more, that says I, remains. I recall here the countless people confined to asylums. I also remember here peoples who, as a result of processes of colonization or war, have lost all access to what they once called their culture, their land, or their language. Any of these peoples, and so many others of us who feel ourselves without essence, may still try to identify with something.¹⁶ But when we try to access it, we have nothing. We are only beginning to learn how to think through and truly feel such experiences, or gaps in experience, and the way people act and think politically or antipolitically out of them. Stirner, in his particular European geopolitical trajectory, seems to have arrived at something like this vertiginous *zeroself*.¹⁷ With regard to the countless Causes through which peoples have thought of themselves as inhabiting or developing a collective sense of self (more or less successfully distributed to individuals),

I conclude that at least some of us are breaking out of History. That some of us never entered it. That many of us feel ourselves empty.

About the funny term Police-care

The empty transhistorical or creative self, the Unique, enacts appropriation, making everything proper to itself, at least everything that it wants. By now this should mean: it indefatigably discovers or invents a singular perspective on itself, and by extension on everything else. What is funny about this is that we might also call this to *consume*. The empty Ego consumes whatever it desires. But unlike a full and substantial self, unlike the possessed, it consumes events and actions and makes them appropriate to nothing, to something that is ultimately empty. This is a mockery of that "sacred" (220) notion of property which concerns things. It takes the relations of property to such an excessive point that they simply fail to work and so is, in the strictest sense, a destruction of property. To make sense, property requires legal and economic individuals. 'Legal and economic individuals' describes at least two causes, two forms of possession, two imaginary substances. If Stirner only said to us: *I want to use you; I want to make you my own*, then he would still be a weird, exaggerated variant of a liberal. But he also says: *I want you to use me. I expect you to use me. I don't want you to ask me for help; I want you to take from me. And I'm going to take from you*. "I do not step shyly back from your property, but look upon it always as *my* property," in which I need to 'respect' nothing. Pray do the like with what you call my property!" (220). Now this is a description of an economy, however rudimentary. In fact, we could call it Stirner's outlandish idea of mutual aid.

Often, when we try to think about or practice mutual aid, we drag into our activities an entire alien morality, thinking and living in terms of what Stirner calls the *police care*, in short making the community another Cause. As Cause, the Community is already a micro-State, a "tissue and plexus of belonging and adherence" (198). It is all too common for people to feel a horrible obligation to the Community and therefore to feel guilty when they fail, which of course they in-

¹⁶ Giorgio Agamben writes: "Do we not see around and among us men and peoples who no longer have any essence or identity - who are delivered over, so to speak, to their inessentiality and their inactivity - and who grope everywhere, and at the cost of gross falsifications, for an inheritance and a task, *an inheritance as a task*?" (*The Open*, 76).

¹⁷ See my 'Two Styles ...' I think there are also many points of comparison, geohistorically speaking closer to Stirner, with the Russian nihilists. We probably need these comparisons since Stirner is clearly the stupidest - not to mention most preposterously racist! - when he stages a crude universal history at the outset of *The Ego and its Own*.

evitably do. Somewhere a standard or measure arises or is borrowed, and immediately someone starts measuring. Someone else accepts the measure and asks: how *much am I* giving? Stirner observes: “The spy and eavesdropper, ‘conscience,’ watches over every motion of the mind, and all thought and action is for it a ‘matter of conscience,’ that is, police business. This tearing apart of man into ‘natural impulse’ and ‘conscience’ (inner populace and inner police) is what constitutes the Protestant” (81-82). Need I say that this is not only about certain sects of Christianity, but many more of us besides; first of all those of us, atheist or not, who have absorbed what is still called a work ethic? The State, or the States in *ovo* that so many Communities manifest, are gatherings of people that take good police care of each other. As Causes they maintain themselves first of all. “Every ego is from birth a criminal to begin with against the people, the State. Hence it is that it does really keep watch over all. It sees in each one an egoist and is afraid of the egoist. It presumes the worst about each one and takes care, police care, that no harm happens to the State” (179).

That is how a moral or, of course, political ideal is invoked as the Super-Ego of the group or of the Community. Remember someone’s repetitive chatter: *Don’t we all believe in this and so don’t you want to be doing it?...* Of course this is the very form of the dialogue—if we can still call it that—in which someone invokes the Cause, and more or less politely demands allegiance, threatening meaninglessness as the terrible alternative. What I am asked to do is to sacrifice myself for the sake of belonging in exchange for the gift of meaning, of words and organs. This is the blueprint for all moralizing politics. Some of that should have been obvious in the preceding. If I emphasize the Community as a Cause, as it so often and so sadly is, if I indulge my wish to bring this phrase, *taking police care of one another*, into the everyday lexicon, it is because it is comparatively easy to call someone out for being bossy, for telling other people what to do. It is more difficult to think of and intervene in the subtle and insidious forms that police care takes. A rich terrain.

For those of the Community, any alternative to belonging seems like it will fail. Indeed, it will fail the Community, or the Community will fail in and through it. What is outside Community, since coexistence is in some sense inevitable? I learned this lesson in reflecting on something I do constantly: public speaking. Of this activity Stirner writes that it is to ask others to consume me (305). Enjoy me, the Unique invites you, consume me. (To this I am tempted to add the masochist’s erotic whisper: “use me.”) Render inappropriate what I appropriated. But what is this gathering of consumers who feel allegiance to nothing, not even to the Community?

We are all Unions of Egoists

Peter Lambom Wilson has noted in several places that perhaps the Ego is another ghost, well on its way to being another Cause. One can, after all, take oneself too seriously. Referencing Landauer, Wilson suggests the Ego “still retains - despite all Stirner’s determination - a taint of the Absolute.”¹⁸ Certainly when I read Stirner I sometimes have to pause to cleanse the unpleasant aftertaste left by too much comparison of Self with God. It’s what is still all too dialectical in Stirner, the desire to invert the monotheist nightmare rather than just wake up from it. Certainly I have

¹⁸ *Escape from the Nineteenth Century*, 10. My sense of Landauer is that he would have dissolved this Absolute in the direction I outlined in the previous section—that of annihilating the self. In his case, the inspiration was probably mystical, given his interest in Meister Eckhart and Jewish mysticism.

witnessed people assimilating such an Ego to an individualism that is rugged, all too rugged. I mean that the theoretical mistake of identifying what makes me Unique with what I think I am (Ego as conscience or consciousness) is perhaps a variant of the more ordinary mistake of believing that one can just be an individual in some simple way. Reflecting on the phenomenon of life, Henri Bergson wrote: "Individuality is never perfect ... it is often difficult, sometimes impossible, to tell what is an individual."¹⁹ As though we are not all divided within and sometimes against ourselves first and foremost, before and after possession! But that is *not* separation. To disattach the Ego from the Cause, to allow it to float off in a nominal or indexical way instead of delivering it to oneself and others as though it bears the heaviest weight (conscience or consciousness, terrible psychological depths, etc) has this happy consequence: I can affirm myself as multiple and have done with pledging allegiance to the Unified Self and the Cause for which it stands.

I like to think that the process of appropriation and misappropriation, of making proper and making improper, is happening in the emptiness of the self, as its effort of selfconstitution, as much as it is happening beyond, as relations with others. Stirner does sometimes write about internal conflicts, but I rarely have the sense of clarity about what I want that he tends to assume. (Perhaps my mask does not fit as well as his did.) One could express the process of individuation that makes me Unique as a series of inner conflicts. That is, we could concretize the concept of the Ego by adopting another perspective in which there are many processes, not just one. Something like that is a concrete aspect of embodiment. I find that I am composite, that I am composed by many Ego nodules, partial or micro selves²⁰ that crop up and fade away depending on what activity I take up or abandon. They are in some conflict with each other inasmuch as there are different kinds of available activities and pleasures that tempt me, attract me, repel me, and seduce me. The process or processes are the chaos together with unregulated impulses as emergent desires.

Tempt us; attract us; repel us; seduce us. All of us. For now *ji.am* many. Too many for a Cause - for we do not all agree. *That, it seems to me, would be a better reason to say that *||o* Cause can be mine but my own. If there were some kind of absolute limit it would be: my body is my own. Stirner's parodic seizure of power over himself echoes this weirdest of all feelings. Perhaps that nonsense is how the sense of what is appropriate or proper arises. It could also be how the concept of property is ultimately dissolved.

We could understand this still empty, now multiple, self in *and as* the famous Union of Egoists that Stirner presents as annihilating society and State. "Society is our state of nature ... But the dissolution of society is intercourse²¹ or union" (271) "It is not another state that men aim at, but, their *union*, uniting, this ever-fluid uniting of everything standing" (199). "The State and I are enemies. I sacrifice nothing to human society, I only utilize it; but to be able to utilize it completely I transform it into my property and my creature, that is, I annihilate it, and form in its place the *Union of Egoists*" (161). The Union of Egoists is precisely what made so many communists - even the Situationists - turn away and run from Stirner.²² His suggestion was, simply, that the

¹⁹ *Creative Evolution*, 15. But "life nevertheless manifests a seatSh for individuality, as if it strove to constitute systems naturally isolated, naturally closed."

²⁰ I take inspiration here from Felix Guattari's idea of "vectors of Rectification." See his discussion in *The Three Ecologies*, 44-45.

²¹ Intercourse can refer to economic exchanges or sexual pleasures. "Intercourse is the enjoyment of the world" (282). Both senses converge here.

²² "The one-sidedness of Stirner's notions on the relations with the organization that he enters or leaves at whim

inevitable processes of formation of groups would involve folks joining and leaving the group at will. “If a union has crystallized into a society, it has ceased to be a coalition; for coalition is an incessant self-uniting; it has become a unitedness, come to a standstill, degenerated into a fixity; it is — *dead* as a union, it is the corpse of the union or coalition, it is - society, community. A striking example of this kind is furnished by the *party*” (271). The Union does not, cannot, operate through separation or the police care that manages it. I approach or recede, variously saying: I want to use the group and be used by it; now I don’t - I withdraw myself.

If we start from the Ego, as the imaginarily full and substantial individual, and conceive of *that* entity entering and exiting the Union of Egoists, there are many reasons to conclude that this is not a viable scheme for cooperation or coexistence. However, from the perspective of an empty and creative self, we are thinking of multiple selves already going on in one body. There is no particular reason to think of (always imperfectly) individual bodies as the best or highest instance of the Unique, as opposed to unique desires and impulses - or unique groups. Individuality is not absolute, but relative. There are actions in which I act as one; there are also actions that are profoundly conflicted and even self-contradictory. This is not necessarily a weakness and it is not always a mark of separation in me. For we are each of us already a Union of Egoists. My part in composing a group as a Union of Egoists is to disband one Union and convene another, setting multiple selves in circulation, so that certain of mine connect with certain of yours. In the group, these impulses or micro-Egos circulate in a way both related and unrelated to their circulation in me. Naturally all of what goes on in my body is not connected to all of what goes on in your body. A Union of Egoists is an “ever- fluid” circulation of selves, a circulation of affects or desires. Thus what ends up being *I* or *me* - my Cause, my property, ownership, finally - has to be redefined beyond the individual body. For the exact duration of a Union of Egoists, *I* is distributed in it. When others appear or disappear, *I* is redistributed. That is precisely what is already happening in individual bodies.²³ If you have been unlucky enough to sleep through the lessons in which life teaches you the multiplicity of your body, you might still think that the Ego is the liberal individual, the full and substantial self, and that the Union of Egoists is a temporary association among them. Of course *that* ought to sound ridiculous, because nothing will get done except through some combination of coercion and good luck. If you cease to divide up *self* by individual body specifically, feeling the many Unique selves in each body, there must also be equally complex collective selves beyond individual bodies. That would be truly following Stirner’s intuition: the paradoxical statement that I have assumed my own Cause means that in such moments of mutual appropriation and disappropriation we clear the sort of space in which the nothing creates. He was after the greatest possible intensity of the creative moment. How do we take it to where it has almost no limit? What is the plateau of maximum circulation?

There can be no single answer to these questions. I will offer a somewhat abstract description of the feeling involved, though. Stirner has a strange passage that relates to how you and I might

(though it does contain a kernel of truth regarding *that aspect* of freedom) does not allow any independent basis for his passive and defenseless ghost of an ‘organization.’ Such an incoherent and undisciplined organization is at the mercy of any individual ‘egoist,’ who can cynically exploit it for his own ends while disdaining any social aims it might have” (“The Ideology of Dialogue,” in Knabb, 231). This in the course of a defense of the presumably ‘disciplined practice of exclusion.

²³ Bergson again: “The organized elements composing the individual have themselves a certain individuality, and each will claim its own vital principle if the individual pretends to have its own. But, on the other hand, the individual itself is not sufficiently independent, not sufficiently cut off from other things, for us to allow it a “vital principle’ of its own” (Creative Evolution, 42-43).

meet: “The last and most decided opposition, that of unique against unique, is at bottom beyond what is called opposition, but without having sunk back into unity and unison” (186). There are not two; there is not one. The empty Ego is nondenumerable, or beyond measure.

Indeed: Vinciane Despret suggests in her ethnopsychological study *Our Emotional Makeup* that one can crudely classify responses to theoretical and practical crises of notions of the self into two sets.²⁴ The one that has been more common in the so-called Western tradition is to multiply selves, severing a supposedly unified being into various sub-selves invariably distributed in hierarchical structures. (The first cleavage, from Plato to Freud and after, divides the rational and the irrational.) The one that has been less popular, always controversial, sometimes heretical, in that tradition is to erase or annihilate the self. Stirner plays and in playing transforms all three games of the self: the unified self (Unique and unnamable), the multiple self (from the abyss of unregulated impulses to the Union of Egoists), and no self (Nothing, emptiness, “thoughtlessness”). The Ego’s process extends in both directions. Uniquely.

About how he Eats Gods

All of us return, then, if we are fortunate, to the destruction of property—to consumption. One of the plans for thinking modernity that Nietzsche sketched out in his notebooks reflects on unfortunate, sad modern people who cannot digest anything. We might understand all of modernity “using the metaphor of feeding and digestion.”²⁵ “Sensibility unutterably more excitable (- the increase in excitability dressed in moralistic finery as the increase of *compassion* -), the abundance of disparate impressions greater than ever before - the *cosmopolitanism* of dishes, of literatures, newspapers, forms, tastes, even landscapes, etc. The tempo of this influx is *prestissimo*; the impressions efface each other; one instinctively resists taking something in, taking something *deeply*, ‘digesting’ something - this results in a *weakening* of the digestive power.”²⁶ For Nietzsche, what one can digest is a test of one’s health, strength, and power. Metaphorical or not, this Alimentary Logic is profoundly consonant with Stirner’s thought: what we have digested is literally what we have made our own, and digesting or consuming something else is also how we become more than what we are.

Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert’s 1898 article on “the nature and function of sacrifice” could be read, in all its glorious sociological dryness, as an expose of the sacrificial logic of the sacred Cause. They describe religious rituals in which the credulous one eats: “By eating the sacred thing, in which the god is thought to be immanent, the sacrificer absorbs him. He is possessed by him...”²⁷ The sacrificial logic is a logic of absorption: and in absorption, possession. Absorption would then be the psychological or physiological prerequisite for identifying yourself with an alien Cause. It/should not surprise us, then, that *The Ego and its Own* is peppered with constant references to eating: eating things, eating other people, eating gods too. Stirner’s rejection of the Cause is a rejection of the practice of sacrifice, and of every politics and morality based on a sacrificial logic.²⁸ “Everything sacred is a tie, a fetter” (176).

²⁴ Despret, 97 and passim.

²⁵ *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, 178.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ *Sacrifice*, 62.

²⁸ This notion of sacrifice was clearly important to Raoul Vaneigem in the writing of “Basic Banalities,” reprinted

For every Cause is indigestible to the credulous. “What I take as absolute, I cannot devour” (183). It remains and separates me from myself, ly and painfully redistributing the micro-Egos, generating an imaginary fullness, fixing an identity.

Alternatively, to think of ourselves as eating something and not being possessed by it is to think ourselves dispossessed. Stirner writes, as I mentioned, about the world being haunted: always more ghosts, more and more spirits, more and more things that possess, more and more guilt, and so on. He writes about how this is growing. Here he is navigating Nietzsche’s accelerating world:

Around the altar rise the arches of the church and its walls keep moving further and further out. What they enclose is *sacred*. You can no longer get to it, no longer touch it. Shrieking with the hunger that devours you, you wander around about these walls and search for the little that is profane. And the circles of your course keep getting more and more extended. Soon that church will embrace the whole world, and you will be driven out to the extreme edge. Another step and the *world of the sacred* has conquered: you sink into the abyss. Therefore take courage while there is yet time, wander about no longer in the profane where now it is dry feeding, dare the leap and rush the gates into the sanctuary itself. If you *devour* the *sacred* you have made it your *own*. Digest the sacramental wafer and you are rid of it. (88-89)

Yes, digest! For you are the “desecrator” (165). But observe: Stirner assumes that you are hungry. To be hungry, to be desirous in any way, corresponds to the feeling of being empty. Such feelings are indices. They are clues for patient meditators who stubbornly insist , on slowing down the *prestissimo* of our present. These conditions testify to emptiness and not to a lack that could be filled. They tell me not just that I need to eat (to consume so that I will be something) but also that I am to set off across what others call sacred space; to me it is a void. I continually discover and lose myself in the void. Yet I continue to act. That is what Stirner meant, I think, by excessive remark: “I do not love [the world], I *annihilate* it as I annihilate myself; I *dissolve* it” (262). To seriously take up Ego as a Cause to which I am obligated would inevitably mean to be possessed by myself, by some element that I no longer want to be. It would be my horrible apotheosis. That cannot be ownness. So, repeatedly, patiently, Stirner interrupts such moments, returning to these sentiments. I’m hungry. I’m dispossessed. I’m nothing. As Unique, the creative nothing is not the beginning of a theogony, much less an anthropogony: it is the ever-repeated destruction of property in oneself.

About the Fields of Ownness

What could Vaneigem have intended in his often invoked distinction between life (*vie*) and survival (*survie*)?²⁹ Although he often deployed it in a simplistic way, the idea is beautiful in its inversion of the apparently obvious dominance of the economy (understood in a restricted sense): survival is not what is basic, primary, of the body and its needs, but rather a weakening, a vampirism, the imposition of a superior (*sur*) element on life (*vie*). And this by life itself. Vaneigem perhaps invited us to try to conceive of life itself - life *by* itself, life’s ownness, without transcendent illusions.

in *Situationist International Anthology*, and is taken up again in chapter 12 of *The Revolution of Everyday life*. In this sense he represents the aspect of Situationist theory and practice more receptive to Stirner.

²⁹ Aside from his better-known texts referenced above, see also *The Movement of the Free Spirit*.

In this sense life cannot be conceived, much less lived, in terms of any transcendent meaning or project. Contemplating our emptiness, considering the swarming micro-Egos that compose us, we might learn the lesson of our irreparable relations to something alive but impersonal, inhuman. It could be what Stirner called “The Un-man who is in some sense in every individual” (125). It could be the pre-human or for- human, if I understand what Frfcre Dupont was grasping after with these notions in the book, *species being*.³⁰ It could be what Bergson called “a haunting of the social form in the genesis of the individual.”³¹ It could be everyday life - but not the everyday life (*le quotidien*) of citizens (of the *polis*) that the Situationists described, after Lefebvre, as colonized. Not *le quotidien*, then, but what Bergson, again, called *le courant*: literally, the flowing. The flux of life in and beyond the human.

life in this sense is ultimately an impersonal circulation of desires, impulses, affects. That is what an egoist paradoxically, impossibly almost, speaks in the name of when he rejects the Cause, when she joins or parts ways with the Union of Egoists. So many masks at play on the fields of ownness: hello, egoists. Hello, nihilists. And all of this has been my fancy decoration on another such mask, one I wear today, to tell you that if anything is worth reading, it is not to find something to believe in. That other mask that accepted the gift of a nickname, *Stirner*, wrote: “We read it because we are interested in handling something and making it ours.”

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³⁰ My understanding of this fine book (also, I might note, signed with a pseudonym) leads me to think that much of what I have written here ought to be consonant with its provocations.

³¹ *Creative Evolution*, 260.

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Its core is the negation

Alejandro de Acosta

Spring 2013

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I have always considered my inclination to anarchy to be irreducible to a politics. Anarchist commitments run deeper. They are more intimate, concerning supposedly personal or private matters; but they also overflow the instrumental realm of getting things done. Over time, I have shifted from thinking that anarchist commitments are *more than* a politics to thinking that they are *something other* than a politics. I continue to return to this latter formulation. It requires thinking things through, not just picking a team; it is more difficult to articulate and it is more troubling to our inherited common sense.¹ I do not think I am alone in this. It has occurred to some of us to register this feeling of otherness by calling our anarchist commitments an *ethics*. It has also occurred to some of us to call these commitments *anti-political*. I think these formulations are, for many of us, implicitly interlinked, though hardly interchangeable. What concerns me here in the main is the challenge of what it could mean to live out our commitments as an ethics—though I think the relevance of this thinking to anti-politics will be clarified as well.

I intentionally write ethics, and not morality: as I see it, ethics concerns the flourishing of life, the refinement of desirable ways of life, happy lives. Tiqqun put it well:

When we use the term “ethical” we’re never referring to a set of precepts capable of formulation, of rules to observe, of codes to establish. Coming from us, the word “ethical” designates *everything having to do with forms-of-life*. ... No formal ethics is possible. There is only the interplay of forms-of-life among themselves, and the protocols of experimentation that guide them locally.²

Many of us have been able to reject morality as a form of social control, as the stultifying pressure of the Mass on us, as imposed or self-imposed limitation on what we do and what we are capable of doing. Much the same could be said for any *ethical universalism* which, though emphasizing ways of life and not moral codes or injunctions, tends to homogenize ways of life in the name of a shared good; it does so by surreptitiously presupposing that good and treating it as a natural fact or self-evident transcultural reality. In short, it rejects transcendent morality only to re-introduce it immanently. Our rejection of this single Good went often enough in the direction of *pluralism*: the story went that there were many Goods, many valid or desirable forms of life. This seemed obvious enough, even intuitive, to many of us. The story went well with anarchist principles of decentralization and voluntary association, and resonated with many in the years when anti-globalization rhetoric emphasized Multiculturalism as a practice of resistance and The Local as the site of its practice. It also made sense, or at least was useful, insofar as it was an efficient way to communicate an anarchist perspective to non-anarchists, especially to potential anarchists.

So here we have two different approaches to ethics. One tries to secure access and orientation to a single flourishing form, the criterion being that it be understandable by all: the Good unifies. The other approach claims that there are many such forms, and this plurality itself is the criterion: the Good distributes itself into Goods. Always suspicious of universalizing claims, for

¹ “*Il senso più comune non è il più vero*,” wrote the heretic Giordano Bruno: “The most common sense is not the truest.” The type of thinking I invoke here takes its distance from what the Mass regards as common sense.

² Theory of Bloom, LBC Books version, 144. These phrases condense an entire trajectory of writing on ethics that encompasses Deleuze, Agamben, and Badiou, beginning, naturally, with Spinoza and Nietzsche.

many years I sided (more or less comfortably) with the latter, participating in a game of adding -s to the end of words like people, culture, gender, and so on. Though I was never too concerned to recruit, so that the benefits of communicability were irrelevant to me, this game nevertheless seemed linked to an affirmative gesture, affirmative specifically of difference and plurality in the political sphere. There was always the question of recuperation, i.e. that governmental and other institutions so easily incorporated such pluralism into their functioning as its liberal pole (the conservative pole, which was always present implicitly at least, had to do with norms of governance or rule-following generally). For example, these days university administrations trumpet Multiculturalism louder than anyone else, and Locally Sourced is a hot marketing term. This troubled those of us who took this side, but we countered by emphasizing what could be called raw plurality as opposed to the masticated, digested, and regurgitated version we got from administrators and mouthpieces of all sorts. Choosing pluralism, eagerly or grudgingly, we might have ended up as uneasy relativists; or we might have been working hard to expand the frontiers of liberalism and democracy, there where the word *radical* finds its most docile partners...³

I have come to realize, after what I now recognize to be good deal of confusion, if not unconscious hedging, that even as I labored on the limits of pluralism, my thinking was incongruous with that position. My writing and conversations repeatedly gestured in the direction of another position, irreducible to universalism and ever more desperate attempts at pluralism. It is a *nihilism* that denies the validity of the singular Good at the heart of universalism, as well as the distinct senses of the Good at the heart of pluralism. For nihilists, the only ethical gesture is negative: a rejection of the claims to authority of universalism and pluralism. For us, all such claims are empty, groundless, ultimately meaningless. And this is what was really at stake in distinguishing ethics and morality. My idea of a happy life is not something I reason my way to, or choose, but rather something that manifests senselessly... but I can use my reasoning (my judgment, even!) to help in pushing back, reducing, destroying everything that blocks my way of life.

This report on what must be not only my own trajectory, but also part of the history of the last twenty-five years (more or less for some others) is due in part to some crucial pages in Duane Rousselle's *After Post-Anarchism* that consolidated *this* thought of nihilism for me. Rousselle argues that the nihilist position I have just described has always been the ethical core of anarchism, and that we are now in a moment where this may finally be recognized.

2

I want to respond to *After Post-Anarchism* because it contains that significant provocation. Unfortunately, for most of its readers, this book cannot but be an exotic object. To whatever degree it discusses familiar ideas or even lived situations, it does so through arcane routes. Yes, it is difficult reading; but it is not by engaging with what is most difficult in it that readers will happen upon the few remarkable insights that it contains. Rousselle's writing is difficult because of the

³ It is also fair to say that, since pluralism is such a key aspect of liberalism, many anarchists simply cling to a kind of radicalized liberalism as their ethics, and their politics, not because of any gaps in their thinking, but because they actually are radical liberals. The problem, of course, is either that they do not recognize it, or that they will not admit it. At least Chomsky, in the 1970 lecture "Government in the Future," admitted as much, advocating a confluence of radical Marxism and anarchism as "the proper and natural extension of classical liberalism into the era of advanced industrial society."

density of his references and because of an unfortunate penchant for wordiness and digression. Although I would be the last to say that every idea articulated in theoretical or abstract terms can also be phrased in ordinary, so-called accessible language, I suspect that much of what I find valuable in *After Post-Anarchism* can indeed be restated otherwise. I intend to do so here. As I noted, this aspect of *After Post-Anarchism* struck me as an unusually clear formulation of thoughts I had been struggling to express for years (among other places, in the pages of this magazine). So, instead of a broader critique of post-anarchism (which Rousselle has a knack for folding back into a plea for its relevance) I will limit myself to some brief remarks about his misprision of the respective roles of theory and practice.⁴

Post-anarchism receives numerous formulations in this book, but really only two definitions. The first is simply that it is a “discursive strategy” (31): not so much a theory as the outcome of ongoing discussions and debates in a theoretical space where anarchism, post-structuralism, and new social movements (as theorized by their participants and outsiders) intersect. In this respect I could make many objections or clarifications, but I will simply note that for such investigations to proceed as Rousselle intends, anarchism (as “classical anarchism,” 4 and *passim*) must be interpreted as “anarchist philosophy,” sometimes “traditional anarchist philosophy” (39 and *passim*).⁵ The second definition, which follows from the first but is more provocative, is that post-anarchism “is simply *anarchism* folded back onto itself” (136). For Rousselle this means an anarchic questioning of the ethical basis of anarchism, a search for the anarchy in anarchism; he later specifies his own version of this folding in terms of the distinction between manifest and latent contents of statements.

Here I can underline both the weakness and the promise of Rousselle’s approach. Whatever the silliness of the term post-anarchism, I think the second definition’s project of questioning, of folding back reflexively, is of interest to any anarchist who does not take their position on questions of morality and ethics (or anything else, for that matter) for granted. When he is pursuing this sort of questioning, Rousselle is at his strongest. When he is treating the anarchist tradition interchangeably as a series of historical figures, events, practices, etc. and as the discursive or conceptual framing that can be abstracted from them (“anarchist philosophy”), he is at his weakest. He repeatedly falls into the intellectualist trap of describing actions as the result of pre-existing theoretical attitudes. “Can we at least provisionally admit,” he asks rhetorically, “that anarchism is not a tradition of canonical thinkers but one of canonical practices based on a canonical selection of ethical premises?” (129). Freeing himself from the idea of an anarchist movement set into motion by a bearded man’s intellect, he remains on the side of the intellect by presupposing of a pre-existing set of premises on which practices are “based” and from which they derive their status as “canonical.”

One more critical remark about the weakness in this approach. Rousselle describes post-anarchism in a third way, and this one is not so much a definition as an illustration. He writes

⁴ I do not intend to attack what is all too easy to criticize in a book framed as an intervention into post-anarchism, a topic that I am not concerned with, and which I am sure is less than popular with the readership of *AJODA*. I happily leave the task of settling the accounts of this book with the proponents and opponents of post-anarchism to those who find it worthwhile. I similarly leave to one side the discussion of the relation of Georges Bataille’s ideas to ethical nihilism in the book’s final chapter.

⁵ Rousselle only makes occasional references to “classical” anarchists other than Kropotkin, who is his major case study. I take it this is because Kropotkin is thought of as the most explicitly ethical of the original anarchists, and also because he has been the object of sustained attention among post-anarchists.

that post-anarchism is the “new paradigm” (126) of anarchist thought: “The paradigm shift... that made its way into the anarchist discourse, as ‘post-anarchism,’ allowed for the realization and elucidation of the ethical component of traditional anarchist philosophy” (129). He is so zealous in his promotion of this term that several times in his book he annexes authors who explicitly reject the term, such as Uri Gordon and Gabriel Kuhn, to the cause. This all seems to me to be in bad taste. There is also a more profound problem at stake: paradigm shifts do not happen because one says they do. The declarative, performative wishes evidenced whenever Rousselle uses the language of advancement or progress, as though what was at stake here was a science, tell us much about his intentions, but always fall flat in terms of convincingness. Even if there is a paradigm shift at work in anarchist theory (or practice!), there is no reason to consider the shift as an improvement. We are probably just catching up to an increasingly complex, chaotic, and uncontrollable world. So I fault him for misunderstanding what a paradigm shift is, for wildly exaggerating the overall importance of post-anarchism, and for framing anarchism too abstractly as an inchoate philosophy. Nevertheless, returning to my principal reasons for writing this essay, I will now praise Rousselle, for some of what he writes about ethics.

3

Early in *After Post-Anarchism* Rousselle states that, answering what he calls “the question of place” (roughly, on what grounds do you make an ethical claim?) there are three types of responses. There are universalist theories, which state that “there is a shared objective essence that grounds all normative principles irrespective of the stated values of independently situated subjects or social groups” (41). This would include most religiously grounded moralities, as well as appeals to human nature. Most such theories are absolutist, but they need not all be so; utilitarianism is an example of a “normative theory that proposes that the correct solution is the one that provides the greatest good to the majority of the population.” The second set of theories, which corresponds to what I called pluralism in the opening section, is what Rousselle refers to as ethical relativism. “Relativists believe that social groups do indeed differ in their respective ethical value systems and that each respective system constitutes a place of ethical discourse” (43). That is, there are different systems (of belief, culture, custom, etc.) that may ground morals. Again, there is an interesting subset, a limit-case: “At the limit of relativist ethics is the belief that the unique subject is the place from which ethical principles are thought to arise” (43). This corresponds to most types of individualism.

The provocation I am underlining in Rousselle’s book is that, rather than try once more to save pluralism by pushing it farther into a parodic relativism, he pursues what he calls *ethical nihilism*. His first stab at a definition runs: “ethical nihilism is the belief that ethical truths, if they can be said to exist at all, derive from the paradoxical non-place within the heart of any place” (43). That is, nihilism denies the ground, or at least the grounding or claim to grounding, in ethical universalism and pluralism. “Nihilists seek to discredit and/or interrupt all universalist and relativist responses to the question of place [...] nihilists are critics of all that currently exists and they raise this critique against all such one-sided foundations and systems” (44–45). Obviously, this completes the triplicity with which I began this essay.

It is from this triplicity that Rousselle develops his analysis of ethics in relation to anarchism. Rather than argue about existing moral codes or ethical paths, Rousselle suggests that another

position has so far remained largely undiscussed: the nihilist one that rejects the authority or normativity of such argumentation. He states that post-anarchists, so far, have approached “classical anarchism” as a universalism (generally based on human nature) and sought to redistribute its ethical impetus in the direction of relativism. What Rousselle seeks to do, by contrast, is to make explicit the implicit core of classical anarchism; and that core, according to him, is ultimately nihilist. “One must therefore seek to remain consistent with the latent force rather than the manifest structure of anarchist ethics, for there is a negativity that is at the very core of the anarchist tradition” (98–99). Centering his discussion on Kropotkin, Rousselle claims that while Kropotkin’s manifest ethics was clearly universalist (grounded on an appeal to human nature), his latent ethics was nihilist. “If it can be demonstrated that Kropotkin’s system of ‘mutual aid’ also called for the restriction of the free movement of the individual then it can also be argued that his work, like much of traditional anarchist philosophy, was always at war with itself” (146).⁶ The ethical nihilism is revealed by chipping away at the manifest content of the old saws, serially revealing the conflicts they conceal, the latent content that was always implied in them:

Anarchists are against the State and Church

implies...

Anarchists are against the structures of representation and power at work in the State and Church

implies...

Anarchists are against any other structures of representation and power analogous to those at work in the State and Church

implies...

Anarchists are against any structure of representation and power

implies...

Anarchists are against all authority, all representation

implies...

Anarchists are against ...⁷

Now, most anarchists will drop off at some point in the chain of implication, judging it to have gone too far past what they regard as common sense. (Our enemies might be less inclined to think they have gone too far.) What does this mean? Roughly speaking, that under analysis

⁶ Rousselle frames this claim as a claim about theory, and the conditions under which theories are formulated. He does not frame this as a historical argument, although the idea of conditions obviously implies theory. For example, he references in passing the shared approach of the Russian Nihilists and Kropotkin in a discussion of an article by John Slatter: “Slatter took Kropotkin at his word when he argued that ‘[anarchists must] bend the knee to no authority whatsoever, however respected [...] accept no principle so long as it is unestablished by reason’ (Kropotkin as quoted in Slatter, 261). Here, however, Kropotkin’s rationalism was maintained but only to reveal a useful parallel: ‘The appeal to reason rather than to tradition or custom in moral matters is one made earlier in Russian intellectual history by the so-called ‘nihilists’” (ibid.). Like Kropotkin, the Russian ‘nihilists’ (or ‘The New People’, as they were called) adopted a rationalist/positivist discourse as a way to achieve a distance from the authority of the church and consequently from metaphysical philosophies. The meta-ethics of Kropotkin’s work ... thus reveals, not ‘mutual aid,’ but a tireless negativity akin to the spirit of the Russian nihilists: ‘[the anarchist must] fight against existing society with its upside-down morality and look forward to the day when it would be no more’ (Kropotkin as cited by Slatter, ibid)” (146–147).

⁷ This is my way of rewriting the contrast between manifest and latent content that Rousselle derives from Freud. Rousselle’s way of explicating this has but two statements, one showing the latent content of the other through elimination. Mine has more to do with pushing a thought to its limit. They converge in that, for this to happen, thinking has to engage with the unthought: ...

the initial emphases on opposition to state or religious authority give way to an unbounded hostility to all authority; that the opposition to political representation opens onto being against all representation; and that the critique of the unfoundedness of existing moral codes concludes in a sense of the ungroundedness of all morality. And they do so in two senses: historically, as the overall tendency of anarchism has sufficient time to develop (that it will be repressed and denied by its adherents as well as enemies is not evidence against this); and psychologically or subjectively, since this overall tendency is also an intimate matter in the life of individuals, part of the unconscious of its first and present proponents (and so analogous claims about repression by adherents and enemies most certainly apply).⁸

Rousselle suggests that, although most post-anarchists thought they were improving upon anarchism or developing its intuitions, they were in fact rendering it more docile, because more akin to liberal ideals; he, on the other hand, has revealed its nihilist core, its true and original inclination to anarchy. The problem now becomes: when anarchists disavow this nihilist core, opting for some version of relativism (or universalism!), how do we answer them? For the same reasons that I do not take Kropotkin's or Bakunin's manifest ideas as my guides, I do not take what analysis might reveal as their latent content as my guide. And if I do not find this kind of argumentation compelling, why would I use it on another? This is where Rousselle's intellectualist assumptions undercut the force of his claims. I do think, however, that the ethical nihilist position is at the core of most anarchist discourse and practice, as its latent content. That is, I think he is basically right, *not specifically about so-called classical anarchism, but, proximately and for the most part, about anarchists*. Rousselle's psychoanalytically inspired method of reading texts should be transformed into a rhetoric, or rather a counter-rhetoric, that can intervene in the present more directly. What he does with old texts, others might be able to do with people, groups, and contemporary texts. But how and when to use this counter-rhetoric? The least I can say is that I am not in the business of convincing anyone about what they really think. I may well keep my analysis to myself, or state it in resignation of being misunderstood; or I may use it to attack. Whatever the case, the nihilist position will be known in that it exposes the differend between itself and the others, and *between the others and themselves*.

This is consistent with the basic formulation of nihilism as a negative ethics. Actions taken in its name are always provisional: to reiterate from *Theory of Bloom*, all we have and all we know is "the interplay of forms-of-life" and "the protocols of experimentation that guide them." No one knows what the world would be like if it were populated with nihilists alone! Following the previously cited sentence on the negativity at the core of the tradition, Rousselle cites one of his sources, the moral philosopher J.L. Mackie:

[W]hat I have called moral scepticism is a negative doctrine, not a positive one: it says what there isn't, not what there is. It says that there do not exist entities or relations of a certain kind, objective values or requirements, which many people have

⁸ This is obviously where one should reiterate the argument made by Shawn Wilbur and Jesse Cohn against the first wave of post-anarchists: they had built their collective case on a caricaturesque reduction of historical anarchists in their reconstruction of "classical anarchism." Many egoists, for example, explicitly stated what Rousselle claims can only be grasped as a latent content (i.e. what appears only when explicit statements are analyzed). The best one can say about Rousselle's analysis in this regard is that it destabilizes what many consider to be the center and the margins of the anarchist tradition, or canon. But it does leave one wondering why he discusses Kropotkin at such length instead of Stirner or Novatore, for example, who are referenced only in passing. Is there something at stake for him in emphasizing ethical nihilism as a latent content as opposed to a manifest one?

believed to exist. If [this] position is to be at all plausible, [it] must give some account of how other people have fallen into what [it] regards as an error, and this account will have to include some positive suggestions about how values fail to be objective, about what has been mistaken for, or has led to false beliefs about, objective values. But this will be a development of [the] theory, not its core: its core is the negation. (99)

In my language, the negation corresponds to ethics as a way of life; the account of error, to what I call a counter-rhetoric. I praise Rousselle, then, because he contributed to a defense of what is negative in anarchism, while also hinting at a defense of negativity as such. He makes space for us to read passages such as the one by Mackie, above, creatively, offering them to us as lessons—logical lessons about what anarchy means. Its core is the negation.

4

Such logical lessons are useful, arguably necessary, if we want to discard hope at this juncture and think with more sobriety. Most of the thinking from this perspective remains to be done. It concerns the conjunctions and disjunctions between several senses of nihilism. First, there are those most familiar in the milieu as positions: nihilist anarchy and nihilist communism. Second, there is nihilism as a theoretical concern in other writers, from Jacobi to Baudrillard. Lastly, there is the diagnostic sense of nihilism inherited from Nietzsche. Articulating these with the ethical nihilism Rousselle discovers/invents at the core of anarchism will be a complicated task, so I will limit myself here to an enumeration of provisional consequences stemming from what I have written so far. I offer these consequences as a relay from *After Post-Anarchism*'s provocations to the thinking that remains to be done: to make it possible, to prepare it as best I know how. The first two consequences suggest how we might deploy the triplicity to understand and critique contemporary anarchist approaches. The latter two concern the broader relevance and context for ethical nihilism, setting out from the anarchist context.

The first consequence is that it is now clear that *many contemporary anarchists confusedly combine ethical universalism with ethical pluralism; and ethical universalism with ethical nihilism*. In a society like ours, one whose ideal is supposedly liberal democracy, we should expect pluralist language to be the most likely one in which radicals will offer their analysis and proposals. Community organizing, consciousness-raising, and so on, have obvious links to liberalism and are at best its radical forms. As a result, moralistic types — those who publically advocate a renewal of society, an improvement of government and management (as self-government, self-management), suggesting pluralist approaches — are likely to refuse to discuss or make explicit the universalist core of their thought. Others might advocate the same practices, while privately sensing or even admitting the hollowness of the values they defend. (One disingenuous result of these private/public conflicts is the unrestrained impulse to act no matter what, as though action can never be damaging or compromised, coupled with claims that it is all an experiment, that

⁹ For those not familiar with it, this term was introduced by John Moore to refer to anarchist theory and practice after the Situationist International. It might be considered telling that Moore offered the term in a review of a foundational post-anarchist book by Todd May. The review was originally published in *Anarchist Studies*, but I know it from a zine called *Second Wave Anarchy*.

we are learning as we go, and so on.) This offers a new perspective on the emergence and significance of second-wave anarchy⁹ generally, including post-Left anarchy, green/anti-civilization anarchy, and, I suppose, post-anarchism as well, all of which might now be seen as attempts to analyze and reveal these contradictions, to make explicit the ways in which anarchist discourse was always at war with itself.

The second consequence complements the first: another set of anarchists *confuses ethical pluralism with ethical nihilism*. Here *merely stating the ethical nihilist position coherently has effects*. In this respect I think of those who might have overcome the liberal value-set in politics, advocating destruction of the existent, but continue to drift back to pluralist/relativist perspectives in everyday life and problem-solving due to a lack of imagination. This probably results from unconsciously positing a pluralist society as what comes after a destructive moment, while not consciously framing destructive action as having any particular goal beyond destruction of the existent. I should add here that it would be hasty to collapse the ethical nihilist position into any one practice or set of practices. Destructive practices, partial or absolute, do not follow mechanically from negation. Destruction is not the practical application of a negative theory. I am certainly not saying that destruction is not worthwhile as a practice or set of practices; but I am saying that nihilists by definition reject the overidentification of any practice with their negation of existing moralities and normative approaches to ethics. It is my sense that, once the nihilist position exists as something other than a caricature, the other positions will be increasingly undermined from within and without.

The third consequence is that *ethical nihilism is more than a theory*. It is a way of living and thinking, a form-of-life in which the two are not separate. That Rousseau discusses it only as a theory leaves it to the rest of us to elaborate what else it is, what it looks like, as some say, or how it is practiced. It is my sense that he was able to write this book because of events and situations in his life, in the milieu, in other places. So when I invoke the practical aspect of nihilism, having already said that it cannot be reduced to any practice or set of practices, I mean two things. First, that I mean to underline the unusual tone of all the practices of those that accept some version of the perspective that there is no Outside (to capitalism, civilization, or the existent), or that are profoundly skeptical about any proposed measures to get Outside. Second, that to speak of practices related to ethical nihilism continues to make it seem like a theory that endorses or suggests a course of action, while its interest is precisely that it may not do so. Monsieur Dupont's phrase Do Nothing is relevant here: "Do Nothing... was and remains a provocation. [...] Do Nothing is an immediate reflection of Do Something and its moral apparatus."¹⁰ From weird practices to doing nothing: this is precisely the enigmatic space where anti-politics converges with ethics. Yes, there is a gap, perhaps a colossal gap, between the implosion-moment of societies like ours and the eternal meaninglessness of value claims and moral codes. Anti-politics might be said only to address the former, while ethical nihilism ultimately invokes the latter. But anti-politics may also reveal ethical nihilism; our willful action may accelerate the ex- or implosion of the world to reveal more of the meaninglessness it has been designed to conceal.

The fourth consequence is that *nihilism is also a condition*. It is not merely those who make it their business to think and act in the world that are living with nihilism. The force of ethical nihilism is not so much in being a position one advocates as in its undermining of others' claims to certainty. If we are able to do this sometimes it is because there are many others who, in a

¹⁰ Nihilist Communism, 198.

rapidly decomposing society, more or less consciously grasp the hollowness in every code of action. Take this passage from Heidegger as an illustration:

The realm for the essence and event of nihilism is metaphysics itself, always assuming that by “metaphysics” we are not thinking of a doctrine or only of a specialized discipline of philosophy but of the fundamental structure of beings in their entirety ... Metaphysics is the space of history in which it becomes destiny for the supersensory world, ideas, God, moral law, the authority of reason, progress, the happiness of the greatest number, culture, and civilization to forfeit their constructive power and to become void.¹¹

Dare I add here that something of this condition was also gestured toward in a few precious texts on postmodernism, texts which raised tremendous questions about their present, and by extension ours, only to be buried in an avalanche of increasingly unimaginative discussions, as if to systematically shut down the possibility of such questioning?

What these four consequences add up to is perhaps something on the order of a paradigm shift that some of us are perhaps dimly beginning to perceive. Or perhaps it is much bigger and more terrifying than a paradigm shift could ever be. Rousselle overestimates the importance and centrality of post-anarchism to anarchist theory (and, needless to say, various milieus), and his claim that his theorizing after post-anarchism consolidates the shift from pluralist/relativist post-anarchism, with its reformist and radical liberal tendencies, and a fully nihilist theory expressing the latent destructive content of anarchism, is misplaced. But increasing emphasis on nihilist ideas, and the increasing prevalence of what could be called nihilist measures, is a condition that involves us all to some degree. And we have tried to think it through and respond. The call for an end to government instead of a better, more democratic, more egalitarian form of government is ancient. The call for the abolition of work instead of just, fair, or dignified work is decades old, at least. How many of us no longer criticize competition so as to contrast it with cooperation, but because the victory it offers is laughably meaningless? How many of us have more or less explicitly shifted from advocating a plurality of genders to pondering the conditions for the abolition of gender as such? What to make of the increasing opposition to programmatism¹² and demands in moments of confrontation and occupation?

I intuit two things here: that pluralism seems to continually reveal its relativist core more and more often, and that the revelation of the relativist core will make it increasingly easier for the nihilist position to be stated, with all of its disruptive effects. Conversely, as I have suggested, *merely stating the nihilist position coherently has effects*. I propose that those interested make it their business to *deploy the triplicity*. To which I will immediately add: *there will be stupid and parodic versions of this moment. For some of us this moment will be lived entirely as parody and stupidity*. But there will also be, for some, an opportunity to refine what *our* anarchism has always meant, not as the direction history or society is going in, not as the truth of a tradition,

¹¹ “Nietzsche’s word: God is Dead,” in *Off the Beaten Track*, 165.

¹² A useful term I borrow from *Théorie Communiste*. As they define it: “a theory and practice of class struggle in which the proletariat finds, in its drive toward liberation, the fundamental elements of a future social organisation which become the programme to be realised. This revolution is thus the affirmation of the proletariat, whether as a dictatorship of the proletariat, workers’ councils, the liberation of work, a period of transition, the withering of the state, generalised self-management, or a ‘society of associated producers.’” “Much Ado About Nothing,” in *Endnotes*

or as an ideal of any sort, but as that which breaks from such orientations in the most absolute sense: the negating prefixes *a-*, *an-*, *anti-*... anti-politics as a provisional orientation, branching out into countless refusals.¹³ Our ethics emerges and gives itself to thought only where breaks and refusals clear a sufficient space. We know almost nothing about such spaces, so our ethics might also be defined as the provisional *disorientation* with which we approach our ways of living, the interminable and necessary *skepticism* that characterizes our thinking's motion.

1, 155.

¹³ Speaking for myself, I underestimated the negative in the political sphere, the power of negativity (the attitude towards world, society, spectacle, whatever sets itself up as the All). My temperament led me to emphasize ethical questions about how to live a life of joy, about the places of affirmation (individualism/egoism, the aesthetic sensibility that never lies). I do think one can affirm one's own life, affirm the nothing in it, so to speak, as one resists. Until I realized this, I drifted near this space, but never really knew it. I remained confused about the negative, about the effectiveness of the prefixes *a-*, *an-*, *anti-* ...

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Its core is the negation
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That Teaching is Impossible

How to Live Now or Never

Alejandro de Acosta

2014

1

That *teaching is impossible* is not a proposition to be argued for. It would be of little interest to offer it up for debate. It would be useless to defend it against the evidence of history or common sense. To consider that teaching is impossible is to open ourselves up to an experience of the most outlandish sort. In staging this experience I wish to contemplate the happy frustration of the urge to teach, and to affirmatively invoke the limits of all pedagogies.

It is useful for anyone who thinks that they teach to explore their urge to do so. This urge is an intimate matter, the libidinal support for the innocent claim that good ideas ought to be passed on to others. I call the claim innocent in that it usually leaves the good of ideas (and the Idea of the Good) implicit and unexamined; since the good remains unexamined, people may obtusely invoke their mere participation in efficient schooling as evidence that teaching is possible. That the school, as institution, survives; that the role of teacher is understood primarily in reference to the survival of the institution: these seem to be the only evidences necessary. But one can at least begin to account for and explore the complex of desires that aim at the role of teacher. Some of them wear the mask of the ego: I am the one who impresses the lessons.

Beyond the ego-mask, moving, that is, from what appears as inner to what appears as outer, one may observe the inevitable calcification of the urge to teach into the kinds of systems we call pedagogies. These may be described as organizations, not just of knowledge and methods of passing it on, but primarily of desire. They are institutional manifestations of the urge to teach, or rather, they are the ways in which the urge to teach, combined with other urges, invents for itself a gregarious existence, a school: This is where the lessons are impressed. In this sense, pedagogies may also be characterized as the fantasy of the efficacy of the urge to teach.

To say or think that teaching is impossible is to let go, however temporarily, of both the urge to teach and its more or less precisely formed collusions with other urges in gregarious forms, affirming rather that study is interminable, and so learning is endlessly frustrated and frustrating. To say or think that teaching is impossible is to assert that teaching on purpose, for a purpose, is impossible. For the urge in its gregarious form has other purposes, which concern the person of the teacher, his role, her specialization, in the context of the school; it has nothing in particular to do with learning. I am inclined to think that neither do schools. What anyone who thinks they are a teacher can do purposely is mainly of two natures:

— One can transmit data, information. This is better known as communication. It is commonly assimilated to teaching, but, as students well know, really has nothing to do with it. This transmission is eminently possible and does not require a teacher.

— One can model behaviors and practices, silently offering them up for imitation. This is not only possible, but inevitable. But to whatever extent we do it for a purpose, it is for one other than to teach them. In this modeling we exceed the role of the teacher.

Pedagogy, then, is precisely the in-between of the ego-mask and the school, their mutual insertion, the becoming-method or becoming-gregarious of an urge in a fantasy: This how the lessons are impressed. In this sense to say or think that teaching is impossible is also to invoke the countless ways that learning takes place despite and beyond pedagogy. This is the beginning of the antipedagogical lesson. Let us consider it.

2

Sometimes, I think that I teach. When I do so I imagine I am not alone in underlining the evident gap between discussing practices and engaging in them. Classrooms have this virtue, that in them almost anything maybe said; but to the degree that the desires that allow us to survive in such spaces remain unexamined, we will tend to confuse the ability to say almost anything with the ability to do almost anything. This gap in capacity is especially manifest for me in the context of philosophy or anthropology, in courses that take up topics such as spiritual exercises, mysticism, shamanism, or the many practices that P. Hadot calls *philosophy as a way of life*. I mean any topic where what is posited is not merely thinking differently in the context of a given way of life, but a thinking that (because it is not just a thinking) requires a conversion. Becoming someone or something else, living differently, in short. One can certainly talk about such matters endlessly, treating them as historical or sociological facts, without grasping what is vital in them — without, that is, being transformed in the doing.

The minimum form of the affirmation that teaching is impossible would then be that with regard to practices that require a conversion, at least, teaching is impossible. I found in myself, not just an urge to teach, to be the teacher, but to teach these topics, and the urge was frustrated. The role of teacher became, if not impossible, at least somewhat laughable. The reason was clear enough. No one can teach such practices in a school unless it is the school of such practices: Epicureanism needs the Garden. Thinking I taught, I communicated information concerning these practices, but at a great remove; I did not model them. Moreover, some of them seem separate from any known pedagogy: mystics don't seem to me to have a school, but rather to be those who are usually expelled from schools. This not because schools are dogmatic or authoritarian (though of course most are), but because of the sort of experience that mysticism seems to entail. (Or maybe not. One might go so far as to consider the maximum form of the claim, that the problem has to do with practice as such, with any practice other than those peculiar to schools as we know them.)

So what is left in such situations? The mere intention to teach what is impossible to teach, I suppose: the urge in its raw and complicated form, not its calcification into a pedagogy. We can try to collectively give in to the will to knowledge, to more than idle curiosity. That is, to what is in fact possible given the practices and ways of life that make schools as we know them possible. (As opposed to, and without in anyway devaluing, those that destroy them, or mutate them until they are unrecognizable.) But I find that this will and that curiosity are unevenly distributed. You, teacher, must seduce your students into a certain fascination. That is what I call modeling, at least when modeling has a chance of success. It is akin to what psychoanalysts

call the transference, or to hypnosis when it is grasped that what is at stake in it is something other than mind control, that the one hypnotized must at some level accept the process. It must involve your body, teacher, your gestures, movements, laughter: the mask, its generation, and its corruption. Those particulars can never be bypassed in the mimesis of the model.

But even if the will to knowledge or more than idle curiosity can be modeled and imitated, (and I do think that they can, on purpose and accidentally as well!) I do not think it is wise to claim that teaching has therefore happened, and is therefore possible. Something else is at stake. In modeling, the teacher's ego-mask is revealed in its development (from the urge to the role), but also in its happy failure: the failed transition from the urge through the role to its calcification as pedagogy and its sedimentation in schooling are all provisionally laid bare. In at least one important sense, the teacher is naked. What has been modeled and perhaps imitated is still quite separate from the topics in question, from the experiences at stake in them. What has been staged is rather an antipedagogical problem.

3

Can one pass on anything other than the will to knowledge and more than idle curiosity? What about less exotic practices, those that seem more at home in what we know as schools? For two years I was part of a university committee concerned with feminist studies. Once, in the course of a review of our work, we tried to define what constituted, for us, a specifically feminist pedagogy. The conversation was both frustrating and (at least for me) quite amusing. (Giving students a greater role in planning the curriculum, someone suggested. Allowing people to speak from their experience, another said. Encouraging connections between class readings and real-world issues, a third added. And so on.) The more concepts and examples that we collectively proposed, the clearer it became that we could produce no difference between a specifically feminist pedagogy and good pedagogy in general. It seemed as if the problem was that we had it as our goal to stay away from the humdrum of the generic, unmarked good, and to cleave rather to a more rarefied good, the sharp edge of feminist politics. But in that humdrum, generic, unmarked mainstream, there are said to be good teachers, are there not? Is their pedagogy not good? Many, arguably most, of them are in no way feminists. Our true problem was not our desire to cling to the specificity of feminism — it was that we assumed that we were the ones who impressed its lesson, that our school was where the lesson was to be impressed, and that feminism, our method, our pedagogy, was to be how the lesson was to be impressed. We had supposed that teaching is possible.

Do these assumptions have anything to do with feminism as a way of life? If feminism can be learned, not as a set of theories or 'studies', but as an attitude, as something that can grow into a resistant politics, it is because some of us are capable of modeling it as it exists and develops in our lives. As such it has zero informational content, or its content is incidental. That something like feminism exists at all suggests that it was, at some point, invented. At that time those who invented it were not producing new information (at least that was not what was remarkable in their invention). They were problematizing existing practices and the ways of life they flowed out of and into, proposing new ones. That something like feminism is still possible, still remarkable, suggests that someone can stage that problematization anew, in effect reinventing feminism. What does any of this, however, have to do with schooling?

The committee's troubling, unstated conclusion was that we, presumably experts in feminism as study, could not guarantee that, in teaching classes with feminist content, we were teaching feminism. (A student could, for example, pass a course with flying colors and in some fundamen-

tal way remain oblivious to sexism. The same went for us as teachers of the course). Or, if we were teaching feminism, we could not define in what ways we were doing so in the context of feminist studies.

It ought to be clear by now that this version of the antipedagogical problem does not merely concern feminism. So, where to go from here? One familiar path is that of a certain resentment, leveraged in this case against the good teachers who do not mark the differences that we do, leveraged against students who do not become feminists or whose feminism is alien to us, leveraged ultimately against ourselves, in our inevitable failure. This resentment is fed by the failure of an ideal of representation and inclusivity (its index: the presence of a certain sort of data, of information) to effect anything other than a reform in schooling — in the curriculum, I mean, in studies, defined according to the standards, the good, of what we know as schools.

Another path, which I admit I fell into as if by instinct, would be that of bemusement. It would be to simultaneously admit that teaching is impossible and that feminism, if it is a form of resistance and not just of study, will be reinvented quite despite those of us who, well-meaning, might think we are teaching it.

4

Let us consider, then, the lesson of resistance, turning from reformist to revolutionary pedagogies. Another university tale: I was once asked to speak at a symposium called “Achieving Success as a Latino”. I was asked by the organizers to address the difficulties Latinos and Latinas might encounter at a predominantly Anglo institution: obstacles, more generally, that all minorities face in the educational system. I said more or less the following: I don’t want to speak purely in praise of schooling, the overcoming of obstacles as progress, confusing the efficacy of schooling with the unqualified good of learning. I want to affirm learning in its entirety and as a process, with all of its conflicts and breakdowns, not to adopt a narrative of successes in the face of hardships. I regard phenomena such as Latinas dropping out of school, not going to college, feeling alienated in college, not just as problems to be solved institutionally, by schools or by groups in schools acting as their proxy. If we view all of these ‘problems’ as negativities, deficiencies, bad attitudes, we miss their complexity, what in them is positive, is desire. I think Latinos and everybody else have countless reasons and ways to engage with schools. I also think that Latinas (and everybody else!) have good reasons to resist some or all of what is institutionalized as education. Among other things, I am referring to what we know as schools: generally, spaces where training, discipline, authoritarianism, bureaucracy, are made more or less efficacious; spaces that are often culturally hostile or indifferent, etc.

A young Latino indeed ought to ask himself, What is school to me? Why should I risk my life for this ? — of course life here is not the life taken away by the gun or torture, but the life of one’s barrio, community, friends, family — because many aspects of what it means to feel in one’s own skin, at home, or in a community are threatened in schools. That’s on the side of the construction of identity, a sense of self. On the side of the destruction of identity, the desire that so many of us have to overcome what we’ve been told we are — that process and its freedom are also threatened in that schooling has always had to do with acculturation to a dominant culture, language, religion, etc. And also in the sense that schools neither teach nor favor rebellion. Institutionally this is discussed in terms of curriculum and catchphrases like campus climate, diversity, etc., but I think the real issue is one of power and gregarious desires: the school’s explicit and implicit hierarchies and their insertion into greater social arrays. Let us consider those seen as problems or at least having problematic attitudes as resisting. I think

that they are right to do so, at least as right as the schools in exercising power and modeling gregariousness. Some are more at home here than others. People inhabit, move through, move in and out of a school, at different speeds, for different reasons, in different moods, using different gaits. To regard resistance as a problem to be resolved by the school, or by us as its proxy, is to fully reinforce the role of the teacher in the school: I am the one who solves this problem — I transform this problem into the good of the lesson.

The critical question is: how are we using the school? What are we doing here if teaching is impossible? And this implies its converse: how is it using us? What is it doing with or to us (acknowledging that it is not a thing or subject, but the anonymous, gregarious actions of others) ?

5

That talk ended with a proposal that I now recognize as well-intentioned (perhaps influenced by the good intentions of the symposium's planners) but poorly thought out. It was a gesture characteristic of a certain anarchism that claims for itself the side of the good, that proposes its revolutionary politics as the staging of the ultimate good.

I said: So much for the side of the institution! Schooling doesn't — can't — end there. Gregariousness certainly does not. It is part of being engaged with an institution, resistantly or not, that one tends to orient much of one's discourse and practices around the institution. (Supposing one wanted to define institutions, it might be worthwhile to begin by describing the various forms of this operation of capture.) It takes some distance (and dropping out, along with the other forms resistance takes, is a way to attain that distance) to be able to speak of schools as I have been doing, or of pedagogy as an outgrowth of the urge to teach. But really, there are schools everywhere. If I were to discuss the other possibilities for schooling I could of course talk about activism, popular education, etc., but I would rather race to the utopian end and propose that schools should have the ultimate goal of abolishing themselves as particular, separate, specialized spaces. My political proposal is that all of society be a school: that the social field be coeval with the space of learning. This means, of course, that there would be a series of spaces, remarkable places of learning, rather than one megainstitution. It could come about through a collaboration between those happiest with schools as we know them, and those who resist or refuse schooling, relatively or absolutely.

My anti-political criticism of that political proposal is that making a plan for all of society (especially one with a grandiose slogan such as abolish schools as separated spaces!) without aiming at annihilating what we know as society is to give ourselves a Cause. The Cause of Making All of Society into A School. Now the mask is transformed. I am no longer in the role of teacher, but that of teacher-activist: I am still the one who resolves this problem — now putatively through revolution instead of reform. Schooling would be coeval with society in the worst sense, fostering in people not only the illusion that teaching is possible, but that freedom can be taught (anarchist pedagogy in its most nightmarish form). We would have set out with the best of intentions and ended up with the most grotesque gregariousness. It is true that study is interminable and that schools are everywhere; but schooling is not for all that omnipresent — it can and does end.

I would rather restate that teaching is impossible (and this time perhaps the modesty of the claim, so hard to see at first, begins to shine through). To focus our efforts, our analyses, on failure and resistance is to grasp the eccentric but vital role of modeling in the transmission of practices. It is inevitable that modeling will meet resistance. A model may be imitated, counterimitated, or met with sovereign indifference. We might cooperate, we might fight, or we might ignore

each other. In that social chaos, in its interstices of order and stillness, someone might learn something. But nothing about this can be guaranteed. Why assume, why hope, even, that we will all collaborate? Why sculpt the mask in a way that arrogantly banks on success? It is the urge to teach, again reaching for the form of its survival. I impress the lesson that schooling is interminable.

6

I have already said that modeling is inevitable, and implied that it maybe done more or less purposefully. This is difficult because we habitually vibrate in sync with others who share our models, and in this local phenomenon the entirety of our interactions is to effect tiny variants, microimitations and counterimitations, of each other's practices. The micropolitics of power; or, a day in school. But modeling is also impersonal and indefinite. Its tautological claim: I am the one who lives as I live or even I am the one who expresses the model that I am modeling.

The fullness of a self or a person is, as far as I am concerned, always and only an artifice, that of an apparently completed mask. The mask of the teacher, however, is incomplete. To think, to say, to embody I am the one who impresses the lesson is to simplify, to fool ourselves into identifying with our own mask, to frustrate the many other desires clamoring against the role, demanding, if you will, other masks. To seduce anyone else (to seduce oneself!) into fascination with a model is something else than to mistake oneself for the one who impresses the lessons. It is rather to display the urge, the mask, the frustrated tendencies to pedagogy and schooling, with all of their defects and failures — the failures of the simple mask of the teacher, the gregarious phenomenon of the school, and ultimately the failure of method, of all pedagogy. This impersonation shows what in the urge to teach is impersonal.

One way to conceive of this impersonality is the *silent teaching* R. Blyth reports on in his books on Zen.

We teach silently and only silently, though we may be silent or talk.

Silence: the offering up of the model for imitation, with no attendant command to imitate (or maybe with the most parodic of commands). Informationless speech, laughter, sighs... your body, again, teacher, in its becoming-mask. Everything else is a dance of data.

Irreparably, to live is to offer one's life up for imitation. People teach what they can. People teach what they teach. Everybody teaches everybody else.

This is what I was getting at in deemphasizing the distinction between what can be passed on purposely and what is passed on inevitably. I am more interested in whether such things are done gracefully, as one may live one's life more or less gracefully. And perhaps the most graceful lesson is that teaching is impossible. But how is that to be passed on?

The only way to teach not teaching is really not to teach.

7

One final antipedagogical lesson, this one specifically for my friends, the anarchists. I hope it is clear that I have written from my own resistance. I like to think that, despite my several decades of study, I have resisted schooling. But my distance is double, since I observe that I maintain a willful incompetence when it comes to political movements that amounts to a form of resistance. There are, after all, schools everywhere! It is my style, my predilection, my wu wei regarding schooling, regarding the roles of academics and activists. I believe that everything I have proposed about the urge to teach, about schools, and about pedagogy applies mutatis mutandis to activism, organizing, movements. Try the experiment yourself: go to a rally or meeting looking for teaching. You will find it. Ah, the pedagogy of rallies and meetings!

Some activists and their theorist friends are busy looking to the primitive past or the utopian future for a humanity without social institutions, as though discovering their absence someplace, somewhere, could lead to their amelioration or eradication today. Now, the absence of a given institution, especially one that I find intolerable, such as money or the police, is indeed a fascinating question for study. But study is interminable; it only leads to more study. I prefer to add to study another practice, to model a kind of disappearance, an incompetence that is a way to absent oneself from routinized activities on the side of schools as well as the side of the movements. It is possible to live this as something other than a negation. And as in all modeling, what I can do is simply to offer up the urge to teach and the urge to act as some desires among many. We can try to (and I suppose that we should) eradicate whatever social institutions we find to be intolerable; but we can also do what we can, silently, to lay bare our desires as we discover them, our social teachings as they meet resistances that, after all, have their reasons. We can be naked, with a mask on. Naturally, to call oneself an anarchist is to wear a fanciful mask: *I am the one who...* But if anarchism is our perhaps inevitable pedagogy, anarchy could be something else: our antipedagogy.

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To Acid-Words

Alejandro De Acosta

2014

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Parts of "To Acid-Words" were first presented at a meeting of the Berkeley Anarchist Study Group in November, 2011. The rest of it was meditated on (and off) for the following two years, with a last burst of effort in early 2014. This is to say that it has layers, strata. It is an attempt to address the tremendous anxiety anarchists seem to have about language, and each of its sub-sections responds analytically to various attitudes towards language in the milieu. I think of it as a necessarily incomplete piece, in that it addresses a relation the anarchist milieu constantly denies in seeking out a better language (instrumental, operational), a pre-language, or a non-language. This relation is, of course, its relation to what it knows as Society. But the relations to language in the milieu, and our collective anxiety towards it, can never be entirely considered apart from more or less discernible social attitudes. Ultimately, although there is nothing to be said in general about language from an anarchist perspective, it is sometimes worthwhile to trace the lineaments of some particular anarchist attitudes to language, as I have done here. Two caveats: first, this piece is written from a monolingual point of view, as it addresses a largely monolingual milieu. A vastly different approach to these questions could have begun from multilingualism and translation. Second caveat: what is said here about poesy and poetry is delicately presented in a sideways pedagogy, introducing an idea or three to unfortunate readers who have little experience of these. (That, for example, the term I've used for a certain idea of language, Language, is also commonly used for a loose school of poets and writers whose works have contributed to inspiring precisely the approach I've taken here, is only one of the minor ironies of this essay.)

*& so you print your poems
& no one cares
they hate you sometimes
tell you to go to work
like every one else
or they want you to explain
in american, in english,
in old english, in slang
in political, in sexual,
in religious, in psychological,
in revolutionary terms &
language,
what you meant
& so you hide
take acid
& write an acid poem
or a poem about your city
& say its to increase awareness
of the environment*

*& its words to expand your
head so you don't have
to take acid
and endanger your life
"if it really is dangerous"*
— d.a. levy

le militant n'entend pas, ne voit pas le langage et c'est à ce prix qu'il peut militer
[the militant does not hear, does not see language, and this is the price he pays for
his militancy]
— Roland Barthes

What I add to these lines—what I place between them—is a kind of enumeration, argumentation through serial juxtaposition: anecdotes and examples, a series of scenes I have been witness to; analysis, thinking through what I heard and saw; references, the things people said, or wrote, and also a way of looking back at what they did not say, or write. And asides for what remained to be noted. I place it all between d.a. levy's positive but dangerous "awareness / of the environment / & its words" and Barthes' two negatives, his thought of a militancy that depends on a denial of language, to show something of the gray space some of us inhabit.

So this is not exactly about anarchists. Nor is it about the society they want to transform, dismantle or destroy. It is about how the society anarchists want to transform, dismantle or destroy transforms, dismantles, or destroys them in the moment of saying what there is to do, of writing what they want or think. And about some ways to resist.

Part 1: Moral

*I'm quite serious about the need to resist the tyranny of elemental words... They're words
that brook no argument, that are intended to be outside of syntax and thus outside of
history. I try to resist this when I write.*
— Bob Perelman

How Activists Talk

As I have experienced it, the anarchist milieu (our gray space) is not exclusively or even principally made up of activists. But in the sub-cultural spaces, the social overlaps, and the political neighborhood of the anarchist milieu there is activism, and so there most certainly are activists. It's important to be careful here, because among some anarchists *activist*, like *liberal*, is an epithet. The activists I am talking about are both those picked out and ridiculed with such epithets, and, often enough, some less obvious characters. We will only understand activists (and their talk) if we make them strange again, because sometimes they are our friends. They are also us on some days or in the past; they are us though we are in denial about it. Some anarchists are activists and say so; others are activists in denial. Someone said: "activists without the word."

Others again aren't activists but bear in their speech and action the inertia of activist approaches and tactics, an entire way of life that shapes what it is to be of the Left in North America and probably elsewhere.

Whoever they are, activists talk at meetings. Of course activists also talk in other situations, but it seems to me that to be an activist is tendentially to reform any situation into a meeting. For example, there are people who only socialize by bringing elements of the meeting into the social situation, at the limit by turning social situations into meetings wholesale. There are rallies and protests and so on, but these have much in common with meetings; one sometimes gets the feeling that everything would be over if the people or institution being protested or rallied against would agree to a meeting. Consequently, the activist utopia is a society assembled out of meeting-atoms, a federation of meetings.

The way activists talk at their meetings is primarily in *margarine-words*. These may be *slogans*, phrases whose function is to circulate, not to mean; or they may be certain *oily words* that slip from mouth to ear, person to machine, situation to scene. One way to recognize margarine-words is repetition: they are used a lot, functioning as code words or passwords, their appropriateness assumed, never shown. Ultimately, this is because their circulation is also the usually unquestioned circulation of moral beliefs; but in any given iteration, the repetition may be well-nigh meaningless, just a little index, gentle reminder of the shared morals rather than harsh mnemotechnic. It is never really clear which is primary, which gives form to which: the morality at work, or the compulsion to repeat in its collusion with the most gregarious drives. In any case, the meeting (or the rally, etc.) is the pedagogical site where these morals are usually circulated and sometimes, memorably, inculcated. Another way to recognize margarine-words is that, as repeatable units, they can be coded negatively as well as positively, so that avoiding them or using them only as terms of derision becomes as important as using the ones that are to be circulated, owned, and appreciated. That is how we get, for example, "activists without the word," and moralistic immoralists.

To take this analysis one step further and understand what activism really is, we would have to deepen the discussion of the relation between morality and technology, the primitive technics of repetition and circulation, their ever-larger and more sophisticated technological networks, their absorption of ancient codes and modern laws, and so on; that is, discuss *politics*. It is difficult to explain how these two co-operate, because sometimes morality is just that, moral principles and deliberation and tradition and so on; and sometimes I write morality and realize I am talking more about a certain undeliberated obsessiveness, a sort of neurosis of doing the good that neurotically redefines the good as its own neurotic world-view... how all of these levels of neurosis compose modern political subjects is a question to be set aside for now.

Instead, let's leave matters in the realm of family resemblances and generalize for the productive fun of it about how activists use their margarine-words. Afterwards, we will have to thank the activists for making this all so clear, because they are clearly not the only ones who speak in margarine-words. Margarine-words are all of ours when we aren't paying attention; activists are just those who step forward most flagrantly to show us how we all repeat.

ASIDE 1

Many of the rhetorical effects I designate here as margarine-words are more matters of speech than writing; thus here I concentrate on how some *talk*. The mana-words I

turn to further on are best understood as inventions in writing, though they do have a strange orality in *mutant speech*. It turns out that it's when margarine-words are written down that they are most egregious (though careful listening will find them out); and that mana-words sound strangest when spoken as mutant speech. That said, in this essay I will refer to speech and writing more or less interchangeably, as they occur to me.

Activists use margarine-words primarily in two ways. One is the talk of the bureaucrat, the functionary. Sometimes the speaker is not so good at it, so you have to listen a bit more closely to hear the proto-bureaucrat, the proto-functionary learning her role. Even when it is sophisticated, her talk, which on the face of it is common-sensical and even rational, tends in the long run to the obtuse. *She can't make eye contact for looking, or pretending to look, at all the details*. These are the people said to "fetishize process"—but this is usually because what they want can't be said or done in the language of process. To speak in this way is one way to attempt, with varying degrees of success, to instrumentalize language. In part this means to understand and govern the selective circulation of margarine-words. That's the rationality of it, achieved once a critical mass of margarine-words has been circulated, usually re-circulated if those present at the meeting are familiar with or help out in the task. But because it seeks to master people through margarine-words, and not the margarine-words themselves (mastered, they might cease to circulate, or be erased, as one with good taste stops using certain phrases, develops a studied silence with respect to the parlance they wish to abandon), this speech is a calculated violence done to language, ignoring aesthetic considerations as well as ethical ones (supposing every morality is the harsh reduction of what was or could have been an ethics). Stories told with margarine-words are moral stories; the moral is what you have to do, or not.

The other way of speaking is more mysterious. At first, it just seems to be the talk of the leader, or would-be leader, his exhortations, but in its sinews it is a kind of hysterical discourse, which perhaps has its origin in the loss of control over the first (bureaucratic) one as margarine-words begin to circulate beyond anyone's control. The speaker realizes at some level, not necessarily conscious, that an ersatz accumulation of margarine-words is powerful, draws attention, generates or at least concentrates energy, so he goes for it, he overdoes it, he says whatever comes to mind as long as it accelerates the recirculation of margarine-words. It is a way of speaking that to an attentive listener (by definition someone not implicated in the activist project at hand) seems so wrong that it is right. Instrumentally right. Here the instrumentalization of language, which always eventually fails, tips over into something much less rational. The leader, like the bureaucrat, manages desire as best he can, but his management also depends on the ability to unleash what is less than rational in speech. This may be done cynically, with an eye to benefit from the ensuing confusion, or in wide-eyed hopefulness, confidence that desire is desire for the good, is itself good. In either case the details get lost, the instrumentalization gets scrambled, gets noisy. *He can't make eye contact for looking, or pretending to look, at the horizon*.

ASIDE 2

Do activists listen? Not as activists. But they do hear—they hear the exhortations, calls to action.

* * *

I wrote that the details get lost. Suppose, for example, that someone you knew had at some point read a well-known poem, and thought he had found in some of its well-known lines a grand illustration of his sentiments. Suppose that the proof offered was a kind of translation of those lines into margarine-words. Suppose, moreover, that when he explained this to you, it became clear that he had so profoundly misread the lines that, beyond all ordinary questions of interpretation, he could only have arrived at his self-affirming interpretation by unconsciously inverting the traditional and accepted understanding of the lines. It is a kind of wrong that is so patently wrong that it could not subsist without a lengthy justification of reading against the grain, or an absurdist will to reverse all conventional readings. But go on supposing, and suppose that your acquaintance was in no way capable of such experimental reversals. Suppose rather that it were obvious that he thought himself to be in line with the traditional and accepted reading of the lines. How to understand this? He is on one hand so wrong that his illustration by means of the lines simply becomes incoherent. In another, stranger sense, this reading that is so plainly a non-reading shows a peculiar will to instrumentalize the artwork, to seize upon its cultural cachet. Supposing all this, you could have been witness to the ever repeated birth of propaganda. Incidentally, then, a new definition of propaganda: *violent translation of poetry into margarine-words*.

* * *

If we could accede to an impossible situation wherein the instrumental use of language, the circulation of margarine-words, could be paused long enough to examine how morality is at work in it, we would find a collusion in it of moral stories and stories about language itself. As though margarine-words can only circulate on the condition of pushing away any other possibility for speech. Often enough an activist will say something that sounds like

what you say is theoretical, abstract. I am without theory; I only speak concretely.

The proof of this concreteness is orientation to action. Listen, it is the leader, showing the usefulness of his words. Attend to variants of this story long enough and you will eventually discern the moral, which is simple enough. It seems to be:

You are bad, you use language to refer to itself; therefore I am good; I use language purposefully, in mind of action.

At the meeting, an activist is speaking, saying something, but you can't talk about how it is said. What is to be attended to is some content (a plan of action) that is presumably shared. The accusation of abstraction leveled at users of *mutant speech* flows from this situation, since *mana-words* tend to bear the traces of their invention or borrowing more noticeably than the margarine-words preferred by activists. Margarine-words are always ingratiating, seeking to slip by unnoticed. At the meeting sometimes the bureaucrat seems to say:

My language is the only good way to refer to these matters; I am using language only in this proper way. You should not use it differently in responding, or suggest that activists might be using it differently in the way they speak.

Listen, she is preventing deviation from her script.

How is orientation to action—as the criterion of concreteness and propriety—a problem? In two ways: *first*, because *action is usually defined too narrowly*. It is likely to mean a process or event that is interpersonal, public, somehow forceful, often requiring muscular effort, loud, and so on. Which is to say that it is political, and not infrapolitical, micro-political, anti-political, or apolitical. These sorts of processes or events are adequately modeled, “represented”, so the activist supposes, in her language. When it is a theoretical language, it is deployed with an eye to application in practice (which means the kind of narrowly construed political action I’ve just described); when it is a practical language, it is deployed as almost pure instrumentality: “go there,” “do this,” etc.

If you question the moral of the story that says you are theoretical and the activist is not, you will meet the push to “do something”—to prove the “this-sidedness” of what you have to say with actions the leader or the bureaucrat will recognize as political.

By now it should be clear that our gratitude to the activists is for showing those of us who are listening how this operation works. At the same time it should be clear that, aside from the activists, there are many, many *actionists*, if by that word I may be allowed to refer to those who define action in roughly the way I have above, whether or not they are activists in terms of their tactics or their morality.

And what is the second problem with orientation to action? Simply put, that *action is not the solution to every situation*. At least I clamor for the perspective wherein action has neither priority nor primacy. Inaction, doing nothing, stopping, quitting, and so on, are not secondary or invalid, morally deficient and politically ineffective though they may appear to the *actionists*.

* * *

The word radical, so often used by activists (but not just them), in our milieu generally means very little other than *good*. Most know the etymological story, which is often repeated at meetings or other instructive scenes and teaches that a radical is one who, given a problem, issue, relation, or situation, gets at its root. A radical claims to think, wishes to act, in terms of the root. A simple illustration. Many years ago someone explained radical feminism to me as that feminism which conceives the subordination of women as the root of all oppression and domination—i.e. that all other asymmetries of power are either directly derived or analogically modeled on this root. Despite the undeniable fact of the subordination of women (easier to affirm than to determine *who* in the last instance is a woman) I found and continue to find it painfully naïve to claim that power could ever be exercised so simply (in one primary or root form with its analogues and derivatives). In this case the radicalism would amount to pursuing, or at least believing, such an analysis (and actively not pursuing or believing others); at a deeper level, it has to do with believing in a certain purchase of analysis (in the especially non-analytic way that activists tend to use this term) on realities of social and other kinds.

One could be more generous to the radicals (or just concede more to what they claim is ordinary usage) and suggest that by getting at the root they mean something more like: discovering the true matrix of relations of force underlying whatever problem, issue, relation, or situation is at stake for them. They would then be radical not in the sense that they seek a root or assume that there is one but in a vaguer sense, implying a kind of downward-seeking motion that we could call looking for basic structures, root-like structures. So a radical does not stop until some component

relations of force, the asymmetrical relations of power, have been discovered. It seems to me that this is closer to how *radical* is generally used: those who are habituated to the downward-seeking motion. They speak—by extension: act, move—in characteristic ways. Analysis or theory works for them first as an unveiling, digging up, finding out; then, as a guide to action.

The supposition that what one discovers in the downward-seeking motion is liberatory is perhaps part of what is at stake in the use of radical more as a noun than as an adjective, or its adjectival use in a sloppy, all-purpose manner, indicating another kind of social identity, meaning roughly *the right kind of activist*, equivalent to *activists like us* or *activists who agree with us*. We pass from repetition to gregariousness. In that mode radical, the adjective, may be coupled with countless activities, situations, places, tasks. What does it add?

It adds a morality, or rather it is an index that a moral code is at stake. As I noted, *radical* is just a synonym for *good*, where what is good is delineated in a largely unspoken and thus unquestioned morality. This might explain such otherwise confusing constructions as:

radical mommy

radical cheerleader

radical stripmall

If we try to understand these constructions according to the first definition I suggested, they are almost incoherent. What is the fundamental or root aspect of being a cheerleader, for example? Whatever it is, a radical cheerleader would be an excellent cheerleader. According to the second sense, what is intended might be something more like this: there are radicals, habitués of the downward-seeking motion, and as such they have earned the right to call themselves and what they do radical. If one of these radicals takes up cheerleading as an activist project, cheerleading, otherwise under suspicion as a practice of mainstream society, becomes radical cheerleading. This means good cheerleading, not as cheerleading but as a suitable activity for a radical. But then radical does not really mean one who goes to the root of cheerleading, but rather one who can make an activity (otherwise under suspicion) good, adjectivally radical, by lending interest and energy to it. It is the valuation associated with the downward-seeking motion. It is also the value that margarine-words bear as passwords or code-words. Cheerleading can in this sense be recuperated, but this changes nothing about it—the routines, contents of chants, etc. is not what one would claim was at the root! What changes is the “message”—it is now margarine-words as enthusiastically repeated cheers.

Can we say anything different about other instances of “radical” politics?

* * *

In 2006 AK Press published a book called *Horizontalism*. It is sub-titled “voices of popular power in Argentina” and has to do with mutual aid networks and forms of neighborhood and workplace autonomy after the financial collapse in 2001. Marina Sitrin, who edited the book and has done the most to popularize the titular word in Anglophone contexts, writes:

Horizontalidad is a living word, reflecting an ever-changing experience. While I have translated it as horizontalism, it is more of an anti-ism. Horizontalism is not an ideology, but more of a social relationship, a way of being and relating.

Indeed, the oral histories and interviews in the book testify to an extreme suspicion about established politics of any sort. This suspicion, which sometimes spills over into hostility, is manifest among other things in the descriptive term used for the organization of meetings, neighborhood assemblies, occupied spaces, and so on: *horizontalidad*.

It was not long after I read this book that I met a number of activist anarchists who regularly used the term *horizontalism*, in obvious reference to the book, to describe their own practices and those of others. In fact, it seemed that these folks used the terms *horizontalism* and *anarchism* almost interchangeably, except that anarchism was for those in the know, what I would call the milieu, and *horizontalism* was for negotiating with other activists, or for “the community”—the latter meaning in this case *those to be organized*. The initial conflation makes some amount of sense, as the organizations these activists are a part of were the kind populated by anarchists who do not advertise their anarchism to “the community.” Their emphasis on organizing as such made it easy to refer to what was happening as horizontal organizing. Still, it struck me when I realized that with this crowd *horizontalism* had become a euphemism for *anarchism*, a way to mince words at best, at worst to dissimulate or confuse their convictions.

One could perhaps trace this back to Sitrin’s decision to translate the adjectival noun *horizontalidad*, literally *horizontality*, which models a state of affairs or a process, as *horizontalism*, the, as she puts it, anti-ism. But it is also a perfect illustration of how those used to margarine-words comfortably adopted *horizontalism* as a way to purposely make their position more vague when engaging in activism, while, in the doing, adding one more note of imprecision to that position.

* * *

Should we distinguish how militants talk and how activists talk? Only to some extent. I have known many less militants than I have activists. It’s possible I’ve never met a militant, only would-be militants, which drives me to say that these folks were a species of activist, not so much in their political opinions or organizational forms but in their general orientation to action—and their relation to language. Tiqqun wrote some instructive pages on militants in *This Is Not a Program*, wherein they emphasize the militants’ separation from their communities (activists seek rather to integrate so as to organize). The world of militants is always tendentially the world of secrecy and clandestinity. As if to escape the bureaucratic deployment of language, militants often turn to a completely operational language, trimming analysis down to a series of simple presuppositions about which no further discussion is necessary. Would-be militants imitate this minimalism in their brief statements claiming actions.

But if, as Barthes suggests, the militant is a limit-point, the one who does not see language, one could see activists, in their exhortatory and managerial modes, as being just a little bit more aware of language, because they must be more integrated into ordinary speech. Integrated into

...the most banal of apparatuses, like a boozy Saturday night among suburban petit bourgeois couples [...] it often happens that we experience the characteristic, not request, but possession, and even the extreme possessiveness involved with every apparatus. And it is during the vacuous conversations punctuating the dreadful dinner party that we experience it. One of the Blooms “present” will launch into his tirade against perpetually-on strike-government-workers; once performed (the role being well known), a counter-polarization of the social-democratic type will issue from one of the other Blooms, who

will play his part more or less convincingly, etc., etc. Throughout, these aren't bodies speaking to each other, but rather an apparatus functioning. Each of the protagonists sets in motion the series of ready-to-use signifying machines, which are always-already inscribed in common language, in grammar, in metaphysics, in the THEY.

THEY = SOCIETY, as anarchists use the word. This constant of political speech that is what the *horizontalism* example suggests: there is a minimum consciousness of the experience of language as a raw material to be rendered instrumental, even as there is a generalized amnesia about how this process works. As a guideline, the demand for ordinary speech is always repeated when people deviate too much from the preferred margarine-words (which, being passwords, get a pass). And this ordinary speech is itself dense with other (older, unknown) margarine-words, the keywords of the society that activists seek to change, that we anarchists want to dismantle, transform or destroy.

Our Operation Margarine

This story is about something that repeats: a loophole, a silent acrobatic maneuver accomplished in the course of political speech.

At an anarchist gathering, I attended a workshop whose stated intent was to question the notions of justice and accountability.¹ *Accountability* is another margarine-word, the use of which that day stretched from the leftist demand for “police accountability” to our own “accountability processes” and their implied moralities—not to mention their interminable slowdowns and failures. The hour or so of discussion went like this: at first, everyone who spoke dared to call police accountability into question, describing it as a reformist slogan, and so on; to a lesser extent, our own use of the word in accountability processes also came into question. For a time it seemed as though no one who spoke wanted any kind of accountability. The word was effectively being crossed out: any positive use began to feel suspect. As the hour wore on, and with no one explicitly recanting their initial statements, a kind of discursive inertia seemed to be doing its slow and even work. (Here we might consider silence: what was not said by the majority of those in the room who did not speak, so the dynamics of the group, the crowd—and the pauses and hesitations of those who did speak up.) Eventually, everyone was talking about accountability again: not their kind, but our kind; not the bad kind that is ours, but the good kind that could be ours; not fake accountability, but true accountability. Perhaps some felt for a time that it was possible to discard accountability, the slogan, the bad word we had crossed out, and gesture towards the true relation, the word we might eventually just use without crossing it out verbally or otherwise. Around then someone spoke up and said something like:

despite all this critique, everyone here has returned to using the word more or less in the way initially questioned and objected to.

My first thought was: that comfortable circle is one of the ways critique works! Which may as well mean: does not work. Even those who continued to speak against accountability treated it as a reality, gave the word traction, importance as that which we might, we could, maybe should,

¹ For context on the discussion, see the zines *The Broken Teapot*, *Accounting for Ourselves*, and *Burning the Bridges They Are Building*

with great deliberation, refuse, cross out... so that what would replace accountability as a demand or goal needed to be provisionally referred to as... *accountability*.

* * *

The idea of margarine-words occurred to me after that gathering, when I recalled reading an essay by Roland Barthes about a commercial involving a subtle and effective ideological operation. Barthes describes Operation Margarine as a way of “inserting into Order the complacent spectacle of its drawbacks” and suggests that is a “paradoxical but incontrovertible way of exalting” Order.² Paradoxically—exalting—order. This is the “schema” he offers of the Operation:

take the established value which you want to restore or develop, and first lavishly display its pettiness, the injustices which it produces, the vexations to which it gives rise, and plunge it into its natural imperfection; then, at the last moment, save it in spite of, or rather by the heavy curse of its blemishes.

He calls Operation Margarine a kind of “homeopathy”:

one cures doubts about the Church or the Army by the very ills of the Church and the Army. One inoculates the public with a contingent evil to prevent or cure an essential one. To rebel against the inhumanity of the Order and its values, according to this way of thinking, is an illness which is common, natural, forgivable; one must not collide with it head-on, but rather exorcise it like a possession: the patient is made to give a representation of his illness, he is made familiar with the very appearance of his revolt, and this revolt disappears all the more surely since, once at a distance and the object of a gaze, Order is no longer anything but a Manichean compound and therefore inevitable, one which wins on both counts, and is therefore beneficial. The immanent evil of enslavement is redeemed by the transcendent good of religion, fatherland, the Church, etc. A little ‘confessed’ evil saves one from acknowledging a lot of hidden evil.

The master-stroke of the essay, which takes us from propaganda or ideology to what Barthes called myth, passes from the initial examples about the Army and the Church to an advertisement for Astra margarine:

The episode always begins with a cry of indignation against margarine: ‘A mousse? Made with margarine? Unthinkable!’ ‘Margarine? Your uncle will be furious!’ And then one’s eyes are opened, one’s conscience becomes more pliable, and margarine is a delicious food, tasty, digestible, economical, useful in all circumstances. The moral at the end is well known: ‘Here you are, rid of a prejudice which cost you dearly!’ It is in the same way that the Order relieves you of your progressive prejudices.

It should be obvious enough how such a schema is at work in the discourse around the Army or the Church (or all the institutions that resemble Armies and Churches). Extending it to Astra margarine was Barthes’ way of saying something about how utterly common of an operation

² See “Operation Margarine” in *Mythologies*. I have modified the translation. For example, I thought that Order

is at work here, how natural or naturalized this inverting or turning-inside-out gesture is. That is where Barthes leaves us, in the diffuse world of advertisements, tiny shreds of propaganda. The calque of Operation Margarine I have been discussing here, ours, if it is a myth, is larval or malformed, probably because, like our politics, it belongs to a different kind of order. Our side is, let's assume, the side of the critics of Order; our speech, often enough, bears or formulates critiques of Order. Our stories, our myths, accordingly, are the stories and myths of Order, critical though their form may be.

ASIDE 3

This is in part because critique in anarchist circles means more speech against what I don't like than undermining-questioning the grounds of claims. This has a lot to do with why we talk so much about Society.

* * *

Of necessity our Operation Margarine is more curious. We are, most of us, critics of ideology, of Order as such, perhaps, so our version has less to do with Myth as ideology, as a confusing veil, and more with that kind of myth we secrete as with a gland in the brain. How stories go; how they turn out... In my story, we saved accountability, ultimately by leaving it as the name for what was to replace accountability. This leaves open the possibility of someone who will see fit to extend its range back from our processes (where it seemed to be more acceptable because now under our control) to the police and their allies (Order), because in saying everything bad we could think about the idea in practice, we left unchanged its status as Good. This has less to do, then, with an incontrovertible master narrative (we were indeed able to say we were against accountability) and more about the slow and silent work of gregariousness and repetition on behalf of a morality it is hard to think of, or outside of.

A conclusion about margarine-words: most of the time our speech cannot separate itself from what has been captured by the category of the Good. When we speak in such a way as to repel away from a word associated with the good (crossing out as "critique"), its magnetic force will attract either that same word, or another, to do very similar work (continuing to use the crossed-out word or a euphemistic variant).

One might well ask what a different outcome for the workshop could have been. Maybe none. Maybe we have them just to state problems. One could well consider that many anarchist gatherings happen primarily to make possible a kind of cathartic venting, especially for those who are less than activists or prefer to avoid meetings, which have their own ritual catharsis. But I doubt this would satisfy most. We move on to ask how to shut down Our Operation Margarine. A radical proposal might have been: let us stop using the terms *justice* and *accountability* Moratorium! What would happen if we really could be disciplined enough to abandon these words, or any of our other margarine-words? Not an escape from myth, or from morality, certainly. For a group to choose to eject a word or words from its speech seems more like an experiment for a poetry workshop than a political operation.

The advocates of Order retain an arsenal of terms that we use otherwise for their own purposes. They do not erase the word *anarchy*; they rather use it in a way that we feel is either wrong or

did not need to be qualified by Established.

has the incorrect moral valuation (i.e. responding either *that's not anarchy!* or *that is anarchy, and it is good, not bad*). To temporarily attempt to erase a word would be to, temporarily, make it powerful, attractive, interesting... To permanently erase a word? First, words do not show up in the dictionary with the dagger-cross next to them because of anyone's conscious action. That is the great work of collectives, one thing you can count on the masses for: anonymous forgetting... Second, it is preposterous to think the milieu's ban on a word could have any lasting effect on anyone not involved. The milieu (our gray space) is porous, characterized by constant entry and exit; the ban would never work, because it would have to be constantly announced. This repetition would amount to graduating the terms to the status of negatively charged margarine-words.

Beyond these practical problems of usage, *accountability*, like all margarine-words, is not just replaceable by euphemisms, but is itself a stand-in for other words we are more likely to avoid (we *and* the police and their allies) for some reason or another—*guilt*, for example. We can continue to play the game of replacing one word with another while the underlying morality changes very little if at all, and do so for the most part beyond anyone's purview. Our Operation Margarine, or something like it, is probably a major aspect of how these margarine-words get circulated in and out of fashion as they do, part of our larger tennis match with Order, which might be more pessimistically described as Order's tennis match with itself. From the point of view of such pessimism, which is to some extent the necessary point of view of the milieu, perhaps the only way out is to play the replacing-game very crudely, to play it backwards instead of forwards, using the wrong word instead of the right one. Recall the Situationist-esque vocabulary that was based on a pretend version of this game:

don't say anymore

society

professor

psychologist

poet

sociologist

work

culture

but say

racket

cops

hard labor

shit



and so on. If we cannot stop saying *accountability*, we might as well call it *guilt*, mismatching behavior and speech. Later this year we can talk about Evil, because the mismatch, the glaring, and, for many, unpleasant contrast, is what is really at stake. *Guilt* is indeed the relatively true feeling or desideratum hidden behind *accountability*, but saying so is worth our while only to disrupt. Our next step in this game should not be to repeat ourselves, but to pass on to the more absurd place. This is the logic of *détournement* and plagiarism, which sidesteps the supposition that one can speak in earnest in such gatherings, meetings, workshops, and so on. This play can also turn ugly, as described in the pamphlet *Cabal, Argot*:

When arguing, it is preferential to argue for the sake of being difficult. Semantics are absolutely worth fighting over.

Being difficult and other ludic, non-serious activities in our speech, playing the replacing-game but doing so backwards and wrong, touting the bad as the good and making the weaker argument the stronger, are the only means we have so long as we remain in a more or less political space. And often enough, we awaken to the fact that we have been forced into such spaces. Fortunately, there are other spaces.

* * *

As I was in the course of writing this essay, an exchange between Kristian Williams and Crime-thinc. appeared addressing topics close to what I've been discussing here.³ Setting out from Orwell's denunciation of vices in political speech and writing, Williams aptly points out a range of words quite similar to what I have been calling margarine-words. About such vague jargon he notes:

People who write this sort of thing may have some general idea of what they are trying to say—but they needn't have.

I was pleased to see the very word that first triggered some of these thoughts noted in his article:

"Accountability," "community," "solidarity," and "freedom" are used, in the overwhelming number of cases, simply as markers to signify things we like or favor.

Agreed. What I think I am adding to this, what Williams does not discuss, is that the "things we like or favor" are held together not by vague agreement but also by an undiscussed moral fabric. Presenting the problem as a problem of shoddy writing and vague speech is deceptive. He comes closer when he writes of the jargon:

The words serve instead to indicate a kind of group loyalty, an ideological border between our side and the other side: we believe this, and they don't. Or rather: we talk in this way and say this sort of thing; they talk in some other way, and say some other sort of thing.

³ See the discussion online, or in the zine *Anarchism and the English Language/ English and the Anarchists'*

Again, agreed, but rather than being concerned with a contrast between jargon that says little and a supposedly attainable speech or writing that is both political and communicative, I respond that the jargon is not just a bad choice, but in some important sense a condition (of being a political subject, our neurotic speech as such; of our time, the Spectacle, about which more later). It is also important to note that what Williams is pointing out here is mainly to be noticed in speech, and only derivatively in writing.

I said margarine-words were not just jargon terms, but slogans, compact phrases, sometimes whole fragments of speech. To their ready instrumentality I can now add the trait that reading Williams made me realize was missing: *fear*. Margarine-words mobilize fear; they result from a fearful impression, and their use perpetuates that same fear. The flight away from that fear could result in adopting a different set of margarine-words (and attempting to frighten the frighteners: turf-war as debate), or developing a taste for mutant speech or even acid-words.

I suppose I am more pessimistic than either Williams or Crimethinc., but I will agree with the latter when they write

if we stay within the bounds of language that is widely used in this society, we will only be able to reproduce consensus reality, not challenge it

and (this is of equal importance):

those who are convinced that they speak precisely—yet see imprecision virtually everywhere they look—rarely communicate well with others. That’s not how communication works. It is a mutual undertaking, for which rulebooks are no more useful than they are for any other kind of voluntary relationship.

In any case, when Williams repeats Orwell’s “principle”,

Let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way about

and his six rules for English prose, adding

were there a contemporary anarchist style guide, nearly all of these rules would be reversed,

it is easy enough to agree. But that is because I take Orwell’s rules as an excellent means to dismantle the imagined style guide (of anarchists, of activists, of leftists, of identity politicians, of many others). That, however, is the limit of their usefulness. For it is not really a question of better writing in a space where so few read and even less write. The tensions at work in our speech will not be resolved by codifying written language, or even improving its style.

That is why it is telling that Crimethinc. returns to speech. Questioning the normality that margarine-words depend on and reproduce, and the communication that can only be assumed as given and available by the frightened, the path to mutant speech is another road to what Crimethinc. calls a mutual undertaking; and the challenge to reality is the path to acid-words, speech and writing beyond hope and fear,

“if it really is dangerous.”

Part 2: Amoral

*Beneath the poetry of the texts,
there is the actual poetry,
without form and without text.*

— Antonin Artaud

Mutant Speech

The preceding is mostly a critique of the continued use of words whose significance is exhausted by the context they are caught in. I am now led to an argument in favor of words that function differently, the *mutant speech* I've already had occasion to reference. *Détournement* is sometimes a sign of being trapped, and at other times the operation of those who are capable of entering another space. It depends on whether one regards the overall effect as purely destructive, or whether the new content generated in moments of negation and obfuscation is of any, even temporary, use.

A kind of ludic strategy unfolds in the second case, an idiom characterized not by the oily morality of margarine-words but by the attraction and repulsion of *mana-words*. Mutant speech, the strange constructions formed when mana-words are assembled into talk, is another form the compulsion to repeat may take. It is, on the whole, more conscious and deliberate than the repetition of margarine-words; it appears at the edge of politics, there where it spills over into the anti- and a-political.

Mana-words are the seemingly untranslatable terms that anthropologists, philosophers and other theorists invent or radically repurpose, their clumsy or graceful neologisms, and their re-deployment of ordinary words from living and dead languages. Mutant speech is recognizable in that its repetitions are not of the familiar margarine-words, but citations of more or less rare mana-words. Mutant speech is not just the use of mana-words judged competent by experts and specialists, but encompasses an entire range of hesitations, creative mistakes, more or less willful misinterpretations, and qualifications that betray, sometimes, a hyperconsciousness of language, and, at other times, a kind of psychotic break-out from the neurotic repetition of margarine-words. This last phenomenon could be described as a successful but involuntary *détournement* of margarine-words as described earlier.

Our action-oriented milieu tends on the whole to respond badly to mana-words unless they are old and familiar (often in the process of becoming margarine-words). In our gray space many are not comfortable with mutant speech, preferring what they take to be ordinary language, which always includes a set of socially or sub-culturally approved margarine-words. When mutant speech arises in their presence, or when reading presents them with too many mana-words, many immediately hurl the accusation of abstraction, and some also deliver a judgment of complicity with oppressive institutions. As to the accusation, first, mana-words are not necessarily abstract. Abstraction is rare, and that's what is desirable about acceding to it; mana-words are rare as well but only sometimes abstract. At one point *potlatch* was a mana-word, as was mana itself, which gave me the idea (Mauss glosses it as "spiritual force"). Nothing especially abstract about them, just the novelty of their appearance in our language. In the case of truly abstract

words, such as *singularity*, no one really knows what abstraction is or does; we have precious few opportunities to discover what it can do as a linguistic operation. I have already outlined why and how an activist or *actionist* would respond to it with hostility. Part of the way margarine-words operate is such that many reserve the right to declare that their speech (e.g. a word like *people* or *community*) is not abstract, while other terms (e.g. *biopower*) are. This is more or less willfully misinterpreting the rarity of the word's appearance (which in many cases signals precisely the novelty or fragile instability of mutant speech) as the only index of its present and future purchase or effects. As for the judgment of institutional complicity, such a reaction is obvious enough to predict: anyone who is trained to read or speak in an academic setting (usually the institution in question) is taken to respond primarily to that social/work space and only secondarily to the milieu. Be that as it may, it seems to me that an individual's allegiances are very important when deciding whether to collaborate with, trust, or befriend them, and not very important at all in appraising their speech or writing in its sheer functioning or manifestation. But then those concerned would have to allow themselves to be drawn (or not) by the mana-words themselves instead of trying to determine what team their user is on. Rather than a lazy dismissal of terms due to their abstraction, one could simply opt out of their circulation and not use them, sparing the rest of their circle their *ressentiment*-in-language. It is not so different to say: *I will not use this term* than to say: *I do not enjoy this poetry*.

The idea that what is said in mutant speech can be always translated into the talk of margarine-words is ultimately a prejudice in favor of the latter that costs us the potentials of the former. Though it is not always activists that do it, its most stereotypical form is the activists' bid to translate other forms of speech and writing into what they deem ordinary language (whatever is meant by this, it is a medium for margarine-words). The accusation of abstraction amounts to preparation for such translation, since margarine-words are equally likely to be abstract, their apparent familiarity coming down to the greater rate of their repetition, their more successful function as passwords or codewords. I would recommend to those that demand translation into common terms that they merely respond to mutant speech with *I don't understand this speech*, which should mean something not too different from *I don't like this music or this poetry*.

Someone who finds they hate all music or all poetry and feels that it can and should be expressed in another form, or not be expressed at all, might in that moment consider the silence they are wishing for, as the best possible form of what otherwise has to be taken to mean *I do not know what music is, or I have no true experience of poetry*. As saying so would usually be taken as a request for acquaintance or explanation, the most I can recommend to one who finds themselves in such a relation is not forced translation but silence. About which more further on.

* * *

The rarity of mana-words, their degree of abstraction, is tied to extraction procedures. It is a rare thing to be able to extract a word from its context and redeploy it. In its extracted form it can become useless in its former context. The function and use of extraction is precisely this newly generated specificity and orientation, which can also be a kind of studied uselessness. The *détournement* of margarine-words takes place when speakers recognize the speech situation into which they have been placed, or into which others are trying to place them, and begin to speak from the perspective of the extraction of terms (sometimes even hinting at a possible extraction will do to destabilize the situation).

When one finally accedes to mutant speech, it is easy enough for another to point out that such speech, what is called its theory, cannot be put into practice. Indeed, that uselessness is precisely the desired interfering effect that the *détournement* operated. It is more difficult to understand in what sense the circulation of extracted mana-words is itself a practice of language, a different kind of repetition. The mana-words so circulated (cited alongside practices) always generate confusion. If they do not, it is because they are in the process of becoming, or have already become, new margarine-words. So people are right that abstract concepts, and mutant speech generally, cannot be put into practice without a process of interpretation and concretization. This process could render them margarine-words, or it could produce bizarre new practices (but bizarre practices could also appear on their own with no forethought on anyone's part).

One might note, for example, that it is precisely mana-words that never return to us from propaganda machines in spectacular forms. Margarine-words are shared with and to a large extent take their motive power from the mass and its leaders. Some will always be engaged in saying what *freedom*, *justice*, and *hope* really mean, and it will always be a waste of time. These words do too much work for the mass and its leaders in a society like ours. Mana-words are non-recuperable precisely because they have no generalized use. That is why I write mana-words and not theory, placing them besides what is most compelling about poetic speech and argots of every sort, as three instances of linguistic creativity too underdetermined to reliably motivate and parallel power operations. Mana-words are effective situationally, for some people, in some ways. They are repeated, but not on condition of being recognized. They do not always assume context, but often require context to be established in the real time of speech—mutant speech.

* * *

Everything I've written on mutant speech so far has been an engagement with the imagined (always imagined and imaginary) ordinary speakers of a language, those whose life is a perpetual risk of margarine-words. On the other side, those who have opted for a less ordinary path, familiar with mutant speech, exhibit different relations to mana-words. Mutant speech could also be called *queer speech*, being close to what is discussed in the journal *bædan* as

a force which can interrupt the domination of language over life

Though I would call that language *Language*, the ordinary Language with its margarine-words. In *bædan* we read

*We engage with language insofar as we can deploy it in service of the body. We speak,
we put word to paper in order to send a wink to those with whom we have not yet or
cannot at present conspire in a practice of jouissance*

Jouissance, parenthetically, being a perfect example of a mana-word. Some take maximum pleasure in their repetition, enjoying an almost uninterrupted flow of mana-words. Here I will resort to some analogies that are less than analogies, along the bodily lines laid out in *bædan*, to show that mutant speech does not just have to be more or less successful communication. It is first of all attempted *communion*. Play with mana-words is not unlike covering one's body with water or make-up, or fragrances or lotions, or also smearing oneself with a stream of spit, cum, piss, or shit that one wishes were continuous. The criteria at work here are aesthetic or

hedonistic. Others are begged, sometimes commanded (if the speaker or writer is a top), to smell, to feel the mana-words. The speaker or writer appears for a second as they cover themselves in these words-marks, smearing themselves and sometimes smearing others. From the specialized and academic point of view, this is the least competent kind of mutant speech; in the milieu, it is one of the most common forms, the little dance some do when they first become enamored with what we call theory.⁴ It is repetition for its own pleasurable sake, repetition discovered as a pleasurable event, the breakdown of the passwords and codewords and joy in that failure.

A second form, more competent from the point of view of the specialists, deploys the mana-words in baroque combinations and ornate arrangements. The speaker or writer shows, not their smeared skin, but their entire body as it approaches escape velocity... no ordinary language can catch up to this theory machine. The repetition becomes communicative to an extent, though the effects of extraction are still felt: this is repetition with a difference. Though the more pedestrian critics cannot distinguish between this spaceflight and the smearing, those who discern the difference are left asking: why these terms and not others? Why these theorists? The recession of this mutant speech from what is most oppressive about margarine-words is clear enough: but who is satisfied with a merely reactive strategy, with one more critique? Is anything really gained by sublimating the pleasure of sloppiness?

A third form of mutant speech would be to generate the mana-words oneself. But that would already be something else, translation or creation. In short, no longer repeating. I call those words, as they are created, or when they are recharged with *mana*, *acid-words*.

Jabberwocky, the language

The language Jabberwocky came up, as I recall, in a conversation some years ago, one among many conversations with anarchists where a discomfort with language was manifest. I later diagnosed this discomfort as an anxiety. I only remember some of the participants, many of whom I had just met that night, and, as usual, I think more people were listening than speaking.

How the discomfort was manifest that night, what repeats in such anxious conversations, is not difficult to outline. First, there seems to be an ambient impatience, some frustration with language as such. This can begin with a few words on the language of an enemy, with the vilification of a politician or a onetime friend, but it eventually extends to anyone's use of language. From bullshit to ideology; from dishonesty or disingenuousness to a generalized paralysis of expression. Here's the second part: someone will make an implicit or explicit reference to a certain primitivist refusal of language, or what some call "symbolic culture" generally, a kind of reference to its existence, without taking it on—for good reason. As these conversations often show, primitivism is something more like a commonplace reference than a stated position... Really, what is there to debate here? For a few engaged interlocutors, it is easy enough to include someone named John Zerzan in the twentieth-century philosophy category in Wikipedia, or to write an article criticizing his "philosophy of language", but this kind of classification and attempted engagement completely misses the affective withdrawal of the not-so-thought-out refusal. The gesture I am writing about is the gesture of the many who feel primitivists are right about *something*, while not wanting to discuss it as a matter of philosophy or theory. The point—the *symptom*—is the feeling, the acceleration of the refusal. That is why, finally, there is some vague sense in the

⁴ McKenzie Wark calls this "low theory." See his *The Beach Beneath the Street*, and my comments in "Ways in And Ways Out of the Situationist Labyrinth," *The Anvil Review* 4.

conversation, if it gets this far, that the refusal of language is part of a long list of refusals, and the reference to language is one more way of talking about Everything or The Totality or Capital or Civilization, etc. The conversation I recall was an unremarkable example except for one detail. Perhaps in jest, one of the speakers said that he advocates “speaking in Jabberwocky” as a way out of the Language he knows.

I think he meant that Jabberwocky, the language, is not an other to English, but an other to Language—to language as we know it. “Speaking in Jabberwocky” takes the refusal of Language into account; it is in fact a hypothetical practice emerging from this refusal. And in this refusal I imagine a demand that repetition, conscious or unconscious, dull or creative, come to a halt. Language appears to them as part of a Totality that cannot be simply sidestepped, because some urge to speak is inevitable, and Language is precisely the government of those urges, their guidance, standardization, branding, and so on. But since these individuals will not be governed, and since, so desperation says, eventually all speech decays into margarine-words, and perhaps that is all it ever was, they conclude that we should just somehow stop. Without positing an immediate way out (or a way out to immediacy), “speaking in Jabberwocky” intimates something else: what one could do with that inescapable urge is to speak in a way that is nonsensical. What was my interlocutor getting at with this reference to nonsense? A parodic speech, a parody of speaking? Speech in a very different kind of code, in an invented language?

I am not sure. It would have been easy enough to object that he explained the idea using ordinary English and not Jabberwocky. I would rather emphasize—what has made this conversation stick in my memory—that when seeking a way out of Language (as Spectacle, with all of the implied traits of Spectacle—totalizing, mediating, representative, communicative—that speech, in short, that places us on the side of instituted authority and authority to come), he gave it the name of a poem. The name of the language is the title of a poem; and the title of the poem is a nonsense word. He invoked for me, that is to say, the studied play with language that poetry can involve.

To get to *acid-words*, I set out from this insight. It is perhaps a paradox, or maybe just the weird way things go, that the greatest refusal of the urge to repeat becomes the motor of creation, of differentiation. To get to acid-words, I take inspiration from a poetic outlook, not to recommend poetry in one form or another, but rather to speak as one who has been transformed in his relation to language by poetic speech and writing. This is something other than a defense of art, much less of literary institutions or canons. I am less concerned to defend the arts than to acknowledge the fact of their various existences, valued for some, dangerous and despised for others, as one aspect of that inevitability of speech I referred to above. I would now recast it as an inevitability of expression. On the side of writing, this fact is greater than literature, though literature flows from it; on the side of speech, it includes all sorts of symbolic and linguistic creativity, including the anonymous productions of slang, argots, cant, and various other oral joys: the *poesy* that happens as if by accident (though what is accidental is knowing it is poetic, knowing it as poetry).

* * *

“Jabberwocky”: the poem, and then the imagined language. The poem first: it was of course the first stanza, identical to the last, that my interlocutor had in mind. You have probably seen it:

’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves

Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

It appears in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, where Alice first encounters it as a mirror-image. Upon reading it, she remarks "it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don't know exactly what they are." The five stanzas between the first and last, though they all include nonsense words, follow a kind of adventure narrative.

Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!

And so on. Gillian Beer observes:

The syntax in 'Jabberwocky' is stable, although the semantics are odd, so the story is stable though its elements are obscure.

A little less than twenty years earlier, Carroll had published the first/last stanza as a "curious fragment" under the title "Stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry." Definitions for the eleven key words followed; in *Through the Looking-Glass*, the anthropomorphic egg Humpty Dumpty offers similar (but not identical) definitions to Alice.

In sum: though an exemplar of nonsense verse, "Jabberwocky" is hardly nonsense in the usual sense of the word. A narrative may be discerned in it, and tone, and feeling; and the words that seem to make that discernment difficult are not beyond explanation—explanation that the author did not even leave to the reader. As Beer writes: stable syntax, strange semantics. Additionally, the prehistory of the first/last stanza as a fake sample of old English shows Carroll's concern, in his construction of portmanteau words for nonsense effects, with real linguistic history and processes of word formation. So what strikes us about "Jabberwocky" is not just the initial shock of nonsense, but also the pleasure of inventiveness, and the related pleasure of commentary on that invention.

Jabberwocky, the language, would then have some or all of these traits: first, speaking and hearing it is pleasurable for most: it is patterned and tuneful, sharing some traits of language as we know it (or whatever dominant Language it exists in initial relation to) and some traits of language as it could have been. Jabberwocky makes enough sense that speakers/readers of Language can follow a story in Jabberwocky, while still feeling the need to call it nonsense. Upon closer examination, speakers/readers of Language will determine that Jabberwocky can't be a complete other to Language. It is not an other Language; it dramatizes something of the coming-into-being of language itself. At the same time, in showing this coming-into-being it is recognized as nonsense and designates sense itself as the precarious factor in speech. Here again I would essay an analogy that is something other than an analogy and say that what is dramatized here is the image of an animal that speaks, as in myth, as in fable, as in reality. In the essay in *bædan* I've already cited, there is a discussion of birds in Edelman's theory and Hitchcock's film, indomitable birds that symbolize "our struggle":

in describing this domestication of the world by meaning, Edelman is borrowing heavily from Hocquenghem's understanding of the body as colonized by language through the process of domestication. Edelman, one last time: "Thus the birds in their coming lay to waste the world because they so hate the world that will not accept them that they, in turn will accept nothing but the destruction of the world."

The writer in *bædan* concludes:

Here we must understand ourselves as the birds or else the text offers us nothing.

We are the birds, the animals that speak. Which is to say that Jabberwocky, the language, is not only a pastime, but also something corrosive, destructive, the vehicle of a bodily shift, yes, as with mana-words. It is deployed not only conspiratorially with the aim of orgiastic communion, but to destroy the world (though I would write World, as I write Language).

Jabberwocky, the language, mirrors Language, and it recedes from it, carving out another space for itself; it recedes as it mirrors. What is it showing in its reversal? A fact.

* * *

This fact could be stated as follows:

Poesy happens.

Or:

Acid-words are possible.

The inevitability of language, which is experienced as the urge to speak, to sing, to write, to mark—it sometimes manifests as poesy. Gary Snyder wrote

language rises unbidden.

The other ways language manifests are partially relevant here, but what is truly remarkable is that something like poesy happens, not as literature, not as a secondary aesthetic or artistic consideration, but foremost as the unbidden arrival of language—of speech, of the marks that become writing. Showing us our ancestors speaking exclusively in a poesy that preceded the distinction between literature and myth (as though gripped, at the dawn of language, by that indistinct firstness, its fascination), Vico suggested that poesy might be *the* event of language.

people living in the world's childhood were by nature sublime poets

Or more precisely:

in all nations speech in verse preceded speech in prose.

But not necessarily the advent of what, in all those conversations, we felt the need to reject. Not Language. Of course the history that follows the Vician poetic dawn, the history of civilization, more recently of capital and Spectacle, is the history of Language, of the mediating image, of representation. There is indeed a poetry written in and as Language. Poetry in service of the state; surrealism in service of the revolution. (Debord called the Spectacle the epic poem of the commodity's competition with other commodities.) But there is also—there has never ceased being—poetry in the service of nothing, or in the service of itself, new and irresponsible, another image, another speech, and that is what I think the reference to “Jabberwocky” amounted to in my imagination, and that is how this mask came to life. From there I write to acid-words.

Spectacle/Language

Debord wrote of the Spectacle that it is a social relation between persons *mediated* by images. Here *mediated* renders *mediatisé*, which must be both the mediation philosophers speak of, the forceful introduction of a third term into what one would otherwise call an immediate relation, and also the way something or someone is forcefully placed into a medium, into the media. Or, more weirdly, the forceful irruption of a medium in a person or relation between people. In the former case, since *mediation* is often assimilated to *alienation*, a tremendous amount of meta-physical and even moral consequences seem to follow from generalized mediation, as separation from the real, the authentic, or the genuine. In the latter, which could be rendered *mediatization*, we are considering separation itself: separation as a cleavage not only between us but in each of us; as ruined communion and forced communication; as the taxing propagation of detached images.

To dismantle the Spectacle has usually meant to undo mediation, its technological or at least material work of representation, in some way; a good deal has been written about how to do that. Here I would like to consider the undoing, or at least troubling, of mediatization. It is notable that Debord structured *Society of the Spectacle* in a markedly different manner than his earlier Situationist texts. At first, the constructed situation was to be

built on the ruins of the spectacle

holding out the promise (to some, a threat to others) of expressive communion, perhaps of an immediate relation. This construction was up to the individual or group as creator. In *Society of the Spectacle*, as explicated in at the climax of a dense historical narrative, the undoing of the reign of representation is a strictly political affair, the business of the workers' councils. Here I, too, will invoke history: the decades that it has taken some to become unsure that workers' councils could be the unbinding of spectacular mediatization (and so spectacular society) or, more generally, that political solutions will unbind political problems without setting the cycle of recuperation back into motion. We who feel this way are at an impasse.

Debord also wrote of the Spectacle

the unification it achieves is nothing but an official language of universal separation.

More recently Giorgio Agamben stepped forward to amplify Debord on this point, adding:

Today... it is clear that the spectacle is language, the very communicativity or linguistic being of humans ... in the spectacle our own linguistic nature comes back to us inverted.

There are at least two ways to understand this statement. One is that it is a clarification, because the Spectacle has always been Language. The other is that it is written to register a historical shift, in the sense that something has happened in or to the Spectacle in the course of the decades between 1967 and 1989. It could also just be a provocation. In any case, for those committed to talk of Spectacle and disruption of Spectacle to pass over to this interpretation would mean apprehending the political impasse (impossibility of situations, absence of councils) as something that unfolds in our speech.

Indeed, the principal form this impasse takes today is the frustration or anxiety about language, usually in the background of our speech (most apparent in those conversations not governed by margarine-words). The impasse is manifest in the borderline nonsensical primitivist allegation that language is the first ideology, a crude translation of the idea of Spectacle as mediation, both as explicit claim (rare), and reference or implicit awareness (common). In these uses of the idea of Spectacle, what is principally accessed is its aiming-at-the-totality, which is how Language earns its capital L. We come to such an idea, as Debord perhaps did with images, by first aiming at the totality, *all of it*. We come to the anxiety, the primitivists to their refusal, by asking how to *cross it all out*. Here is an example, less hysterical than most, again from *bædan*:

All discourse consists of nothing but an endless series of affirmations no more insightful than remarking that water is wet, phrased in more or less interesting and more or less roundabout ways. The rest are lies.

Aiming-at-the-totality, we get what I've denominated Language. The endless series of affirmations (yes, yes, yes...) suggests for me a representational language caught in its tautology, as margarine-words wait to be affirmed (code words or slogans to be said yes to) or are offered as ways of being said yes to (passwords), as images are produced in a way completely determined by the medium in which they anticipate circulation. Expressing ourselves with such words or such images may or may not be mediation, but it is certainly mediatization.

As I have noted, the most common attempted escape from margarine-words, *mutant speech* (and the less common one, *acid-words*), leads to a staging of this anxiety (as incomprehension or hostility from readers or listeners, as the speaker or writer's own anxiety before the risk of meaninglessness). From the point of view of Language, these escape attempts are the incorrect way to play the game and will always register as wrong moves, or morally improper gestures (lies). Those who adopt this point of view, bureaucrats or not, would push us back to the stale comforts of small talk or private exchanges with our intimates, those little spaces we suppose we control—and this fantasy of control over private life, true only for a few, is precisely meant to remind us that public or political space is completely covered, altogether occupied, by an impenetrable web of images, representations, or... words. When they arise unbidden we are to recognize, not words, but the web, the medium.

* * *

Suppose resistance is possible. What does the undoing of the Spectacle mean when one considers that the Spectacle "is" language, is Language?

First option: one could hazard decentering an idea and practice of Language tied first of all to nationalism, to a standardized grammar, secondly to a familiar, largely unconscious cultural

conservatism (“the old language is good, the new language is bad”), and third, these two wrapped up in a mediatized dissemination of standard terms and usages. Decentering it, we no longer have Language but *languages*—not just in the sense of the thousands of world languages but also as a congeries of language-games, speech genres, little discourses and narratives within any given language. The idea or representation of Language breaks down into languages, but languages themselves splinter into dialects, slangs, argots, and so on. This is the sense of the project of accelerated fragmentation set up in *Cabal, Argot*: if we are convinced that

in-group/out-group dichotomies are the tension that will tear society apart. Disparate groups who do not understand each other are destined to become separate

then we see that their advocacy of difficult argument is also a kind of test, a test of who understands (gets it, the joke or reference) and who does not—the real-time, in-person formation of the inand out-groups. And so, understandably,

we choose to associate with, or support, particular factions, particular groups, or particular persons. By always taking the side of those within our in-group, we repudiate the representation of the social order that maintains capital, the state, and its technics.

First option, then: the groupuscles and their cant.

Second option: one could save the workers’ councils strategy by rendering them as communications councils, working on the premise that language is for communication, and trying to do it right. This is the solution of *Society of the Spectacle*, but also of an article in *Internationale Situationniste* 8, “All the King’s Men” (the title, incidentally, being a reference to Carroll):

In-group languages—those of informal groupings of young people; those that contemporary avant-garde currents develop for their internal use as they grope to define themselves; those that in previous eras were conveyed by way of objective poetic production, such as trobar clus and dolce stil nuovo—are more or less successful efforts to attain a direct, transparent communication, mutual recognition, mutual accord. But such efforts have been confined to small groups that were isolated in one way or another. The events and celebrations they created had to remain within the most narrow limits. One of the tasks of revolution is to federate such poetic “soviets” or communication councils in order to initiate a direct communication everywhere that will no longer need to resort to the enemy’s communication network (that is, to the language of power) and will thus be able to transform the world according to its desire.

To the question: how do workers’ councils undo spectacular representation? the answer is: because they are communications councils, poetic soviets. They federate the very groups that the cabalists want separate and create a kind of communicational dual power. This idea is also legible in Mohammed Khayati’s “Captive Words,” published in *Internationale Situationniste* 10:

It is thus essential that we forge our own language, the language of real life, against the ideological language of power, the terrain of justification of all the categories of the old world. From now on we must prevent the falsification or recuperation of our theories.

It is not clear how this is to be done other than through the process of fragmentation-federation suggested by the anonymous author of “All the King’s Men.” Khayati concludes by calling for a Situationist dictionary, a linguistic federation tool,

a sort of code book enabling one to decipher the news and rend the ideological veils that cover reality. We will give possible translations that will enable people to grasp the different aspects of the society of the spectacle, and show how the slightest signs and indications contribute to maintaining it. In a sense it will be a bilingual dictionary, since each word has an “ideological” meaning for power and a real meaning that we think corresponds to real life in the present historical phase.

Second option: the councils and their dictionary.

Third option: one might consider unmediatized life or activity somehow beyond Language or Language games. The Spectacle is Language, Language is the Spectacle, insofar as our speech and our writing are bound to this representational form. Part of that is being forced to speak, expected to confess, and desiring it ourselves too—endlessly botched silence. Language rises unbidden... at the incitement of a power relation that demands your participation. We are still thinking about a mode of relating here—what is called, and is, *and is not*, representation and communication. But the Spectacle is not Language because language *is* representational and informational; the Spectacle is Language *as* representational and informational. Forced communication, excluded communion, botched, endlessly botched, silence.

Interestingly, some version of this approach is also legible in the two aforementioned Situationist essays. If communications councils are their major theme, this is their minor theme. Khayati discusses *détournement* in a way that anticipates the cabalists:

The critique of the dominant language, the détournement of it, is going to become a permanent practice of the new revolutionary theory.

[...]

Détournement, which Lautréamont called plagiarism, confirms the thesis, long demonstrated by modern art, that words are insubordinate, that it is impossible for power to totally recuperate created meanings, to fix an existing meaning once and for all.

And this *détournement* is itself possible because of the “insubordination of words”, which Khayati ties to poetry—not poetry as we know it, but an abolished poetry:

Modern poetry (experimental, permutational, spatialist, surrealist or neodadaist) is the antithesis of poetry, it is the artistic project recuperated by power. It abolishes poetry without realizing it, living off its own continual self-destruction.

The author of “All the Kings’ Men” proposes the other available meaning of poetry; in fact, the entire piece is in the main about another way to grasp poetry:

What is poetry if not the revolutionary moment of language, inseparable as such from the revolutionary moments of history and from the history of personal life?

[...]

poetry must be understood as direct communication within reality and as real alteration of this reality. It is liberated language, language recovering its richness, language breaking its rigid significations and simultaneously embracing words and music, cries and gestures, painting and mathematics, facts and acts.

There is, again, the warning against what is known as poetry:

One thing we can be sure of is that fake, officially tolerated poetry is no longer the poetic adventure of its era. Thus, whereas surrealism in the heyday of its assault against the oppressive order of culture and daily life could appropriately define its arsenal as “poetry without poems if necessary,” for the SI it is now a matter of a poetry necessarily without poems.

[...]

Realizing poetry means nothing less than simultaneously and inseparably creating events and their language.

And how is that to be done? Again, fragmentation-federation... But what concerns me more here is that these texts come close to the position that, not poetry as we know it, but something importantly akin to it, what I called poesy above, what a writer in *bædan* calls lying, is a kind of primordial activity that can be tapped into or unleashed as the creation of

events and their language.

In a society like ours we do this through *détournement*, understood as a critical, destructive engagement with bureaucratic language or the language of power, a

language that cannot and need not be confirmed by any previous or supracritical reference

The other, corrosive, side of acid-words. Not acid as hallucinatory creativity, but as corrosive, destructive nonsense on the way to silence.

Third option: [someone(?)] and their silence.

* * *

What I have written here concerns language, then, but only sometimes as Spectacle, as Language. Sometimes one is bound to spectacular Language:

In analyzing the spectacle we are obliged to a certain extent to use the spectacle’s own language, in the sense that we have to operate on the methodological terrain of the society that expresses itself in the spectacle

wrote Debord. Fortunately there are other things to do than analyze! If I were to remain in the language of Spectacle, I would say that, yes, one can sometimes unbind spectacular representation (and my sense of how that can be done, acid-words, is indeed closer to a constructed situation than to workers’ councils). But, unbinding representation, beyond Language, we do not

move beyond language as such. Here we must face our collective anxiety about language. It will still arise unbidden, incited by stranger forces than our human power games. Even in our silence we participate in the semiosis at work in nature. And nature has its own far more ominous silences to which we are not invited. It is possible (which is not to say that it is probable) to use language in a ludic manner; it is also possible to get used by language, to get played by it or be in its play in a way that has nothing to do with being represented or symbolized or representing or symbolizing. Something of that sort was always at work in poesy. And this reciprocal use is related to what the concept of Spectacle intends; in fact, it seems to me to be its sheer possibility (that representation or symbolization presupposes some other kind of language-play, another usage, as work presupposes play or non-work generally).

Read Robert Duncan as he writes about an available shift in attitude,

the change from the feeling that poetic form is given to or imposed upon experience—transforming matter into content—to the feeling that poetic form is found in experience—that content is discovered in matter. The line of such poetry is not free in the sense of being arbitrary but free in its search and self-creation, having the care and tension (attention) almost of the ominous...

Everything I have for the sake of convenience called Language, everything we have (out of what is now almost habit) called Spectacle, corresponds perhaps to the first feeling, which disturbs matter endlessly. It translates the matter of speech (poesy) into a communicable and informational form, botching communion, ruining silence. If it were only a genre, a game to opt into, a dream from which we could still awaken... or turn the page on to see what is next in the anthology... By contrast, the feeling that the form is found in experience, and content in matter, allows for the care and tension that are needed to make and share acid-words. Part of their operation is to destroy Language, but this is not what they are for. They are not *for* anything. This is the freedom of the line sensed by some poets, and also what is also ominous in acid-words: in their play they do not deny or elude silence.

For words are not thoughts we have but ideas in things, and the poet must attend not to what he means to say but to what what he says means.

—To turn away from those who, in a doubly hostile gesture, did not care that levy wrote, and later demanded of him to explain what he meant. So you hide, take acid-words... (It is pleasant to imagine Duncan whispering sweetly in levy's ear, calming him momentarily, a kindly apparition in the course of the trip. To remind him he took acid so as not to have to take acid.)

It remains to ask who is capable of saying they are poets, and why. But as that is something to discuss elsewhere, I will return for the destructive fun of it to talking about anarchists.

* * *

There is no reason to bother with saying you are an anarchist or talking to others if you are not seeking another relation to the world, to life, to thinking, and to language. In this essay I have been especially concerned with the relation to language, but all of these relations are implicated, are at stake. The other relation that we are seeking involves a paradox: we are so concerned with ending the relation we *do* have with world, life, thinking, and language that in the undoing of the

other term we are brought to consider the possibility that the relation itself is impossible. I mean that in some sense we cease to think that there is a World at all, that Life can become a pernicious concept, that Thinking is revealed as not being ours or for us. Following this treacherous path it may turn out that there is simply nothing to be said about language itself, about Language. We are left with this strange idea of crossed-out Language instead of a theory or concept of language.

And yet we find many who speak about language in general, assimilating it to Language. They have not earned the fullness of our attention. They would do better to listen than to speak—to attend, that is, to the speech practices of those around them, and eventually to their own words, just as he who says he hates poetry or music is best invited to read or listen and not to further discussion.

That is to say, if a word or phrase is not taken to the limit where it is (at least in passing) shown to be devoid of sense or purchase, then we will remain beholden to a liberal, or relativist, or pluralist sensibility, the hope for better margarine-words or an unmarked and universal ordinary language that all can share in equally. Mana-words sometimes go to the limit, but usually in cabalistic settings. Acid-words always go to the limit: to discover or invent them is to stop repeating, to repeat with a difference, to risk nonsense; and to arrive at nonsense is to approach silence or, often enough, to become silent.

And silence is beyond difference and repetition.

* * *

A word is not necessarily the unit through which we encounter language. A phrase or an entire discourse could bring us a happy insight as well. However, *word* is the word I've retained for the insight-catalyst through most of this writing; I think of each one as a shard, a fragment of an impossible Totality, the nothingness of Language. After that happy insight dawns, the discourse, the phrases, and, yes, a little word will each remind you of its own plenitude. Fortunately, such memorabilia are all that remains after acid-words do their delicate or grisly work. No hoary nihilist theory of language will appear to conveniently repeat to you what you already silently suspected: that sense is the most fragile matter, a fleeting purchase. However, as a silent accompaniment to the discourse, the phrases, and the little word, maybe there is this nihilist idea of what language is not, *that Language is not*, witness to its dissolution, along with world, life, and thought.

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Alejandro De Acosta
To Acid-Words
2014

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Wandering off from Willful Disobedience

(three remarks and an imaginary title)

Alejandro de Acosta

2011, August

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“ ... outside everything else and inside myself ...”

- Plotinus *Enneads* IV, 8, 1

I have some comments about a compilation of short writings entitled *Willful Disobedience*. It may be an odd experience to read through the book cover to cover as I did. Written over the course of a decade, the pieces in it quietly overlap and repeat each other in form and content. One does not gain or lose much through a linear reading of this collection. But that is how I read it. And so much about this book is strange to me in a way I can barely express! I prefer to say very little about its combination of precision and vagueness, its compact historical narratives and impossibly hostile denunciations of the present. My impression is that of being before a synthesis of incisive challenges and almost dreamlike stories offered as explanations: unusual gifts of an unusual understanding. As far as I am concerned all of this is a wonderful sort of prose poetry for what are admittedly restricted tastes.

What follows is hopefully too bizarre to be mistaken for a critical review. It consists of three interlinked remarks. They are the results of my attempt to orient myself in this mixed writing while wandering progressively farther off in the direction of an imaginary title.

From the will to nonvoluntary action

My first remark concerns the role of the will in *Willful Disobedience*. In the last selection, Wolfi Landstreicher presents in its most complete form a case for revolution that he calls “the revolutionary wager.” I will cite two lengthy passages:

[B]oth hope in a collapse and despair in the face of the present catastrophic reality involve looking at the present world on its terms, not on our own. Those who hold to either perspective have already assumed their own incapacity to act effectively in the world to realize their own desires and dreams. They, therefore, look at the realities of the world not as challenges to be faced and overcome, but as inevitabilities that must be endured. What is missing is the reversal of perspective referred to by Vaneigem, the individual insurrection that is the first step toward social insurrection. To take this step, it is necessary to have the courage to wager on ourselves and our ability to act, on our own when necessary, and together with others whenever possible.

[...]

The world as it is today can seem overwhelming. The idea that revolution is “unrealistic” is not an illogical conclusion, but regardless of the fierceness of the rhetoric of those who assume this, it indicates a surrender to the present reality. No matter how we choose to encounter the world, we are taking a gamble. There are no certainties, and for me this is part of the joy of life. It means that I can make choices on how I will act and that I can base those choices on my own desires. I desire a world in which the relationships between people are determined by those involved in terms of their needs, desires and aspirations. I desire a world in which every system of domination, every form of exploitation, all forms of rule and submission have ceased to exist. If

I lay my wager against revolution, I am bound to lose. If instead I stake my life on immediately rebelling against the ruling order with the aim of social insurrection and revolutionary transformation, there is a possibility that I may win in the long run, and in the short run I will definitely win, because I will have made so much of my life my own against the ruling order that I will have actually lived, vibrantly in rage and joy. (299, 303-304, from “The Revolutionary Wager”)

I repeat: “No matter how we choose to encounter the world ... I can make choices.” Now I underline: *choose, choices*. It seems that the background of choice is an experience of “encountering the world” that, in its uncertainty, seems to hold open for me the possibility of choosing now this, now that path. Here I would like to introduce a cleavage between choice and the experience of encountering the world. In the schema of the wager, we can choose *how* we encounter the world; but can we choose *whether* to encounter the world? On the one side is choice, whatever that is. On the other is the apparent inescapability of a relation to the world. For me these are both striking. The wager emphasizes only the first.

I will illustrate my perplexity about the second with an example taken from elsewhere in the book. In a piece called “Resisting Representation,” Landstreicher advocates “refusing to make ourselves into an image” (137). The idea there is to stop focusing on how we are represented, especially by agents of a hostile media; to reject their advances and not to plan what we do or say around our anticipated representation by them. I tend to agree. But the greater issue for me is about the inevitability of images. Landstreicher writes in this piece as if any of us could halt the production of images, mediatic or otherwise. It seems to me, however, that the production of images ultimately has nothing to do with the media. If one posits a world, there must be images in it. Re-presentation re-produces images — images produced, presumably, in an initial, primary presentation. The bodies that compose the world radiate images, shed them, merely by being in it. Images are produced automatically just as shadows are cast. What we see in them, or their copies, is another matter. I do think the attitude one takes towards the production and reproduction of images matters, but I do not think I can simply refuse it. How does a critique of spectacular images account for these ordinary ones? How does choice account for the givenness of the world?

For Landstreicher, what in me refuses or, more generally, chooses, is the will, a venerable philosophical and political concept. The term and the idea are everywhere in his book. I imagine that, for him, this emphasis on the will is the natural correlate of a focus on the individual. The will, as the faculty of affirming or denying, is indeed traditionally parceled out to individual bodies, souls, or selves. But my question is beyond individualism. One can conceive of individuality with or without the will. One can also experience many forms of group belonging and feel that certain groups do or do not have a collective will. But perhaps the greatest problem with assuming the will as a distinct faculty of the individual is that it divides out in me what chooses from what does not. What does the rest of me do? Follow? (Another, perhaps more obscure, form of this question would be: do I encounter myself in the world? If part of me does not revolt, is it really me, or is it another aspect of the world that the rest of me, presumably the true self, confronts? Aren’t all of these unanswerable questions the result of a leftover idea of the self as a thing, a substance?)

Reading “The Revolutionary Wager,” two questions impressed themselves upon me: what if I have no experience of choice, of the will as a separate faculty in me? What if I merely remain skeptical of such an account?

Entertaining these questions (right now I am not interested in distinguishing between them), we could draw up a more complete picture, wandering off from the strict terms of the wager as proposed by Landstreicher. There have to be at least two other options.

– I could find that I do not revolt. But instead of framing that discovery within the wager (as automatically losing!), where not rebelling is seen as a choice, I could explore further and determine that, here and now, I cannot revolt. Whatever I am, however I am composed, it is not up to me. If I remain within the wager, my determination shows me as pathetic, cowardly. Wandering off from the wager, a new option makes me curious to myself. This is the realm of the involuntary.

– I could find that I *do* revolt. But, in so doing, I realize that my revolt is not the result of a choice I have made. I discover that I am already revolting. This is the realm of the nonvoluntary. Retroactively, I could say I willed it, but why re-enter into that terrain of explanation when the discovery of nonvoluntary rebellion is so interesting?

What is called a choice seems to me to be a minute inclination wrapped up or entangled in a vast network of other, more obscure, less well understood, inclinations. It is something like an unexpected and unpredictable tipping point wherein inclinations get arranged in a certain pattern. I understand such inclinations and arrangements, in their multiplicity, fairly well; I do not understand the place of a supposed faculty of the will among them. Every tipping point is different, because it involves different inclinations. There is no reason other than a moral or aesthetic one to crown a series of actions and events in this manner. There are other ways to tell this story. Most importantly, at any given moment I may be composed of contradictory tendencies, patterns of inclinations arranged in divergent tendencies — at the limit, contradictory tendencies in open combat. What I call nonvoluntary actions are the expressions of such impure and complex processes. In sum, the two new options I propose frame the will, the supposed faculty of choice, as something more artificial, more dependent on naming and narrative, private and public, than the two options offered to me in the revolutionary wager.

To ignore the insistence of my questions and forge ahead, assuming the reality of choice and the will, seems like something one does or ought to do if one has already decided one has a will (and presumably that everybody else does as well). But it seems to me that I can make no such decision except in passing, at exceptional moments. In such moments I might say that there is voluntary action. But there are other moments, far more common: the rest of the time, I would say there is involuntary and nonvoluntary action. From these last two perspectives, I suggest instead that one can feel one is already rebelling, revolting, resisting (or not!), without any clear sense of why. Rather than a wager that explains revolt in terms of the will (or some kind of argument that justifies it in terms of reason) I invoke these odd impressions: “I cannot revolt” (involuntary); “I am revolting” (nonvoluntary). (The dualism is simplistic and awkward, of course. I employ it in the interest of complicating the either/or of the revolutionary wager). In these cases I do not know or cannot justify the action of the inclination that tips a multiplicity of inclinations in this or that direction, let alone multiple simultaneous directions.

The multiplicity of the self is one issue. Value is another. Landstreicher suggests that his wager in favor of revolt is desirable because, opting for revolt, no matter, what, I win. If I deny the choice in favor of revolt, I lose. I am profoundly unconvinced by the valuation implied in these terms,

and especially in their opposition. It is odd to say this, but there are many people I know, some of whom I collaborate with, whose victory I dread. And as for those who have lost or are losing, there is much to be learned in their failures. I would even go so far as to say that the idea of my own victory, especially when I am with others, is somewhat repugnant.

Asking “am I nonvoluntarily revolting?” ought to generate a great variety of answers. It is a far more rich terrain than what is revealed in the flat yes or no of the wager. It is only in the rarest case that I will conclude that I am not, in any way, revolting. (But this insight requires an attention to micropolitics that is, to say the least, scarce). And if we accept the multiplicity in what we call individuals, we can also broaden our thinking to include the almost irreducible complexities of aggregations of people: groups, clans, tribes ... societies. Now, Landstreicher numbers himself among those “who reject this society in its totality” (Introduction to *Reasons of Flame*). But what he repeatedly calls “this society” is far less unified, far more unstable than he conceives it to be. It is not any one thing! To call a society or a civilization a “totality” as he does is to engage in abstraction. To imagine a society or civilization as a great organism or mega-individual presents the same problems as the analogous insistence on a certain kind of personal individuality (they are the results of the same habits of thought). It is one of the fancies of the true individualist, of the mask called the ego: me and the world, me-and-then-the-world, offered as the desirable reversal of everyone else’s the-world-and-then-me. I “encounter” the world, he writes; I do not cease to find such formulations strange. I have only had such experiences (of the unification of society or world into a totality, of facing my life or the world, of the distance implied in such ... metaphors) in moments of the greatest intellectual abstraction.

That is all I have to say about the idea of choice as a pure event, really: when somebody reports on having chosen this or that separate from (in a position of transcendence with regard to) a vast network of other dispositions, I usually suppose he or she is somewhat deluded. But when someone like Landstreicher reports on an absolute and sovereign “encounter with the world,” this claim seems to emerge from a very private, quite incommunicable experience (it is much more difficult to identify a transcendent element in it). In neither case can I say I share this experience; but Landstreicher’s version is clearly the more interesting one for me.

A logic of faith

A second remark begins with the discovery of a silent allusion, that, in my curiosity, I will explore, wandering off in a different direction. The text of the revolutionary wager, in its title, in its logic, and in its insistence, echoes Pascal’s famous text on the wager, which concerns, at least on the face of it, belief in God.

God is, or is not. But towards which side will we lean? Reason cannot decide anything. There is an infinite chaos separating us. At the far end of this infinite distance a game is being played and the coin will come down heads or tails. How will you wager? Reason cannot make you choose one or the other, reason cannot make you defend either of the two choices.

So do not accuse those who have made a choice of being wrong, for you know nothing about it! 'No, but I will blame them not for having made this choice, but for having made any choice. For, though the one who chooses heads and the other one are equally wrong, they are both wrong. The right thing is not to wager at all.'

Yes, but you have to wager. It is not up to you, you are already committed (*Pensées*, 153-154)

Because we are already committed, Pascal argues, it follows that we should choose to believe in God. If we do so and are wrong, nothing happens. If we believe and are right, we can look forward to eternity in heaven. But if we do not believe and are wrong, we will suffer for eternity, while if we do not believe and are right nothing happens. This, in addition to the presumption that the first "nothing happens" is a happier life than the second, tips the scales for Pascal in favor of faith. The wager is stated in absolute terms: I can choose to believe, and accept every consequence of so choosing, or not. Choosing to believe seems to be a sovereign act of will, an irreversible event. Belief is the will's flourishing: "one must believe something!" as the consequence of the implicit "you have a will." But the wager is less about the will as such, and more an argument for the inevitability of faith. This makes sense if we consider an anti-Pascalian response: "I believe nothing!", or at least "I suspend judgment" as the correlates of "there is no will" or "I doubt that there is a will." Pascal includes the second in his text as an impossible position (elsewhere he calls it Pyrronism, because he knows the skeptics are his enemies).

In any case, the wager presupposes the will and conceives belief or faith as its proper deployment. So the question for me is about the strange connections we might make between the will, faith and anarchy. David Graeber refers to faith in an exposition with some instructive parallels to the revolutionary wager. Here he is in the course of enumerating some liberatory principles:

... institutions like the state, capitalism, racism and male dominance are not inevitable; ... it would be possible to have a world in which these things would not exist, and ... we'd all be better off as a result. To commit oneself to such a principle is almost an act of faith, since how can one have certain knowledge of such matters? It might possibly turn out that such a world is not possible. But one could also make the argument that it's this very unavailability of absolute knowledge which makes a commitment to optimism a moral imperative: Since one cannot know a radically better world is not possible, are we not betraying everyone by insisting on continuing to justify, and reproduce, the mess we have today? And anyway, even if we're wrong, we might well get a lot closer. (*Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, 10).

This version of the wager is much more pragmatic; and not surprisingly, Graeber's use of the term *faith* is more nominalistic ("almost"). They are tempered, I suppose, by the sociological and anthropological traditions he draws on. In this schema, one could partially succeed. Graeber probably thinks of faith as emergent from the socius, as an attitude made available by groups through and in their practices, variable as practices are variable, stable as they are stable, etc. Accordingly, he not only proposes we commit, but that we commit to optimism. (It would seem that optimism is the correlate of partial victory.)

Contrast this with another passage by Landstreicher on the wager:

Revolution is a wager, and that wager is precisely that the unknown, which offers the possibility of the end of domination and exploitation, is worth risking, and that taking this risk involves the destruction of the totality of this civilization of domination and exploitation — including its technological systems — that has been all we have ever known. Life is elsewhere. Do we have the courage and the will to find it? (251, from “On the Mystical Basis of the ‘Neutrality’ of Technology”)

The differences should be obvious. This version of the wager is clearly more absolute: the use of the terms “totality” and “will” is its marker. We are not to commit to optimism; the idea is rather that of a pure commitment corresponding to the all or nothing terms of the wager. It is this absoluteness of Landstreicher’s version of the wager that brings it so close to Pascal’s. They both set aside reasonable arguments (for the existence of god, for revolt) and speak to the will. Pascal: “you must wager.” And in so doing, they tell the rest of us, those unimpressed with such a necessity, that we are in fact creatures with a will, “already committed.” Pascal: “how will you wager?”

Let us learn to see the gradations between Graeber’s version of the wager and Landstreicher’s. Let us remain open to the possibility of a qualitative difference between them. One could, of course, describe that difference in more detail as a cultural difference, a difference between practices and ways of life, as well as understandings of the world — which they are both, each in his own way, interested in. For example, Landstreicher contrasts his position with what he calls “moderation,” an “acceptance of what is” (123) ; not to accept is, for him, acting “forcefully” (223). This all follows: once I suppose I have a will, force seems to be its highest expression, its optimal deployment. From there, it is not far to describe “one’s life as a weapon.”

Something about the absolute character of Pascal’s wager, its way of framing the world “on his own terms,” is relevant to understanding Landstreicher’s complete rejection of “what is.” They name the world, society, “infinite distance,” “infinite chaos,” so as to destroy it, attack it, leap over it. Very well. But I still can’t say that I have filled out this picture, or answered my own questions about will and world.

Was Pascal, is Landstreicher, doing anything more than reporting on their own experience? If so, what is communicative in their statements? For my part, I do not think that Pascal refuted religious skeptics. What he did do successfully is write out a logic of faith, attempting to communicate the inner experience of the faithful. But is a wager the true or ultimate logic of faith? Or is it a mask for it to wear before a hostile public? I leave that question to the faithful, just as I leave Landstreicher’s wager to those who feel it speaks to them.

Consider the following notes written by Paul Valéry in a notebook of 1936:

Pascal is the type of the anarchist and that is what I find best in him.

“Anarchist” is the observer who sees what he sees and not what he is supposed to see.

He reasons upon it (*Les principes d’anarchie pratique et appliquée* , 19, translation mine).

(Note the parallel with Landstreicher’s insistence on encountering the world on our own terms). Of course Valéry is only partly right. However provocative it is to register Pascal as *the* type of the anarchist, it is obvious to me that there is more than one type. The interest of

these lines is not in the clarification of who or what is an anarchist, but rather in the making impure of the category of the anarchist by suggesting its type could be someone like Pascal. This making impure challenges us to think differently — about the status of the revolutionary wager, for example.

More impurity: Pascal should not be reduced to his wager (there are, for example, those delightful pages on boredom in the *Pensées* ...). Nor Landstreicher to his. Seeking to reject moderation and to act forcefully *in writing*, though, he had to invent something like the revolutionary wager. But if I think this, I can no longer take the wager on its own terms. It registers rather as an excessive attempt to communicate something that is very difficult to say.

The discovery of mysticism

Wandering one step farther out, a few more lines from the same page in Valéry:

Every mystic is a vessel of anarchy.

Before God considered in the secret of oneself, and as one's secret, everything else is powerless.

All power is contemptible (*ibid.*)

Thanks to my detour through Pascal and Valéry, I have found a way of understanding Landstreicher. It is to say that he speaks mystically. I can understand calling society or civilization a “totality” as something other than a grotesque abstraction if I treat it as a mystical utterance. Maybe for those of us that remain skeptical, or speak from another perspective, this is the most generous approach. I also think, however, that mystics are precisely those who succeed by failing (to communicate). It is no coincidence that the preferred form of expression of the greatest among them is the *paradox*. What characterizes mystics is their propensity to use *every* word, especially *God*, in a way that is paradoxical. What happens when we apply an analogous interpretation to certain anarchist uses of terms such as *society*, *civilization*, or *technology*? I will try to push Landstreicher in this direction, in part because his writing implies it, in part because I suppose he would reject it.

I say that he would reject it because of the way *he* uses the word. In a piece on Marxist “determinist” approaches to technology and progress, he contrasts “a truly historical approach to social struggle” (249) with a mystical one — and classes the determinist one as mystical! This is just name-calling. Mysticism is an experience, not a kind of theory. “The idea of history as human activity” (249) can just as well be a mystical idea as it can be a materialist (or whatever is proffered as the non-mystical position) one. It ought to be clear that I do not use the term *mystic* as an epithet of any sort — though in this context it is, of course, a provocation.

Landstreicher makes a Pascalian case; he uses Pascalian logic. But I doubt he is asking us to have faith in anything. I prefer to say that he is reporting on an experience (of society or civilization as a totality, for example) that I think of as mystical, and that this experience finds its paradoxical expression in a retooling of Pascal's wager. But the paradox does not lie in an overt logical contradiction in the terms of the revolutionary wager. It is in the gap between the wager itself and what it might be imagined to express: inclinations that exceed its terms.

One curious piece entitled “Religion: When the Sacred Imprisons the Marvelous” could be interpreted along these lines. It begins by invoking an “encounter with the world” that Landstreicher calls “an experience of the marvelous” (198). The thrust of the piece is to stridently contrast the sense of the marvelous in individual experience with every form of religion. Here Landstreicher joins those who claim that religion works through separation. Consecration, making things sacred, is its operation, and this expropriation of the experience of the marvelous is theorized in strict analogy with political or economic expropriations. The sacred is of a piece with private property and the state; its agents are specialists of the holy: shamans or priests. Landstreicher concludes:

If we are to again be able to grasp the marvelous as our own, to experience wonder and joy directly on our own terms, to make love with oceans or dance with stars with no gods or priests intervening to tell us what it must mean, or, to put it more simply, if we are to grasp our lives as our own, creating them as we will, then we must attack the sacred in all its forms. We must desecrate the sacredness of property and authority, of ideologies and institutions, of all the gods, temples and fetishes whatever their basis. Only in this way can we experience all of the inner and outer worlds as our own, on the basis of the only equality that can interest us, the equal recognition of what is wonderful in the singularity of each one of us (204).

To “grasp our lives as our own” is equated here with “grasping the marvelous as our own.” Here we have the now-familiar “encounter with the world” “on our own terms” of the wager described in a manner that, for me, cannot remain separated from the claims of mystics.

I will try to imagine myself into this experience. Here is the world; it should be mine, without mediation. Every custom and institution is an obstacle between me and the world. I discover in myself a set of inclinations that act to remove these obstacles; they come in a bundle; I call this bundle the will. The relative totalization, becoming-bundle, of inclinations, seems to me to be identical to the emergence of the experience of the will. End imagination.

Now, I would not say that the becoming-bundle of certain inclinations is *identical* to the will. That is only one way to tell this story. But the feeling of a forceful pattern — that the inclinations are forceful, or seem to get arranged forcefully — in a single direction is my way of accounting for the will as an occasional emergent phenomenon. This emergence is obscure for most. Naturally, those who become aware of, and report on, such processes speak obscurely. Dwelling in all of this obscurity matters, as it could be that the relative totalization of the bundle (it acts as one, it is forceful) is how the experience of society or civilization as a totality is able to occur at all. Once I feel that I can “totalize” part of my experience, creating for myself a faculty of will, I will likely see this effort mirrored in the environment, but now absolutely, as the world. Or as: all of the inner and outer worlds ...

William James offers two key defining traits of mysticism in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*. The first is *ineffability*: something in mystical experience defies expression. Landstreicher does not claim this of the wager or of his encounter with the world, but the experience of the marvelous “on own terms” must have something ineffable in its immediacy. I propose that there is a gap between this ineffability and the text of the wager. The second trait is a *noetic quality*: mystical states are productive of knowledge. There is insight there, important yet difficult to articulate. When something is difficult to articulate, especially if it has to do with an experience of the All, it is common to state it in all or nothing terms.

In the second fragment on the wager cited above (“The world as it is today ...”), Landstreicher mentions “immediately rebelling.” From the point of view of choice this probably means rebelling *right away*, but the context also suggests rebelling *without mediation*. This slippage between references to temporal urgency and to reality is also visible in the description of victory in the same fragment: “I will have actually lived.” Here the order of priority is reversed, since “actually” probably means *with a superior grasp on reality*, whereas the context also suggests doing it *now*.

This refusal of mediated, second-hand experience (the world “on its terms”) is done in the name of immediate, first-hand experience (the world “on our terms”). The mystical Now is the immediate real. Well, all of this is precisely what we need to pragmatically define those who speak as mystics. They are not in a role, nor are they specialists; their experiences are singular to them, untranslatable. Landstreicher rejects what he calls “becoming passive slaves or dissolving ourselves in the alleged oneness of Nature” in favor of “becoming uncontrollable individuals ...” (214, from “Afterword: Destroy Civilization?”). This does not tell us he cannot be heard as a mystic, but it does tell us what kind of mystic he might be heard as. *Who* is the uncontrollable individual? One who senses something in her that can remove every obstacle between her and the marvelous.

For my part, I do not deny the experience of the marvelous. Quite to the contrary! I have it all the time. But it would occur to me only rarely, if at all, to couple it with some kind of sovereign choice or act of will. That coupling suggests to me, in James’ terms, an ineffable experience with a noetic component. That is what makes me — generously! — want to say that Landstreicher speaks as a mystic.

Rather than attempting to destroy the totality, the obviously desirable choice in the revolutionary wager, I prefer to begin by asking how it is that someone could come to see society or civilization as one! I could also ask whether it makes sense to describe the irreducible manyness of impressions and sensations as a world. In so asking I am also able to explore what in me does not share in such a vision. This does not divide me from the voice that speaks in the name of willful disobedience: it brings me (pervertedly, I admit) one step closer to a conversation.

Such a conversation could take up impurity. I do not really think Landstreicher is a mystic. But it does seem to me that instead of accepting the terms of his wager, I can show myself as incompetent in matters of choice, and busy myself with studying what is impure in his statements as well as my person.

I could say: very well, you have spoken. Your utterances are so strange, but also so interesting, that I am tempted to call some of them mystical. This is not an epithet; it is the mark of my interest and also of my distance. When I compare you to Pascal, I see in you the anarchist Valéry saw in him. When I say you speak as a mystic, I am recognizing that you are a “vessel of anarchy.”

The idea of willful incompetence

I am tempted to write something in the future to share my perspective on these matters. I might call it: *Willful Incompetence*.

It could begin from the experience of those who, some or all of the time, do not think they can deploy their will in the manner I have been interrogating; those who do not, or very rarely do, find themselves opting for failure or victory.

It could discuss incompetence (willful!) at making metaphysical determinations.

Here is an inappropriate question: what is the genre of the pieces in *Willful Disobedience*? Are they articles, essays, letters, manifestos, communiqués, rants? They owe something to all of that, and yet they are none of them. I doubt this question is important to most of its audience, but it is important to me. (At the very least I think it is worth asking why they are all roughly the same length. What is this if not a technological constraint — which ought to be interesting to those critical of technology — of zine and web writing? Not to mention the more important issue of attention spans ...). When I called them prose poetry above, I was inventing an answer to this question. As prose poems, though, they immediately spoke to me in philosophical terms. I answered accordingly.

Now, what I am trying to do (here and elsewhere) is to write an essay that wanders off from the thesis. The revolutionary wager is a political proposal, but it is also, oddly, a stylistic option. Pascal's "but you have to wager" is emblematic of this style: *either* you present a thesis (one traditional way is to nail it to a door) *or* you automatically lose by saying nothing in particular.

But one can also refuse the game of the thesis. The game is played by accepting the thesis or offering another; it is refused by wandering off.

Wandering off is to show a kind of practiced incompetence in writing, in thinking — towards the thesis, at least. And much of what is classed as incompetence is in fact a sophisticated and indirect resistance. It could be called nonvoluntary. The thought "in my incompetence I resist" is a more precise instance of the realization "I am already revolting" invoked above. The incompetence in question is something like an unconscious or semi-conscious sabotage of the performance of competence: the dreadful seriousness of willful intervention, force, self-assertion. Someone willfully incompetent finds joy in shame and embarrassment and is well positioned to discover what is glorious in failure. She dwells in the brightness of her symptomatic actions, and could go on to discover in herself the intelligence of a thousand conflicting drives, the multiplicity of passions that does not mirror the supposed totality of the world but consumes it and shatters it, as it is consumed and shattered by it.

How does such an individual meet the friend of a friend? Playfully, remembering Pascal:

Dear Wolfi,

"If he praises himself, I belittle him.

If he belittles himself, I praise him.

And continue to contradict him

until he understands

That he is an unfathomable monster."

(*Pensées*, 40)

Yours,

Alejandro.

Post-script on *The Anvil*

The Anvil, the image, in our context, perhaps suggests first of all smashing. But here we are focusing on the base (the basis) upon which something is smashed rather than the instrument that smashes. At the same time, this Anvil also suggests the craft of slowly, patiently forging *other* instruments.

We do this by writing reviews.

An ordinary review is not much more than a more or less clever summary coupled with an appraisal, a recommendation for or against. The world is full of such reviews. (They are useful to those in a hurry.)

A review in bad taste is written entirely to dismiss a work, a set of ideas; the worst possible review exaggerates this bad taste, and, losing all critical acumen, merely hurls accusations at its author. Those who discover themselves engaging in the most ignorant expositions, the sloppiest thinking, might be invited to explore another discipline, that of silence.

It occurs to me that the superior form of a review is neither to summarize the contents of a work nor to recommend for or against it. It is rather a kind of plagiarism, simultaneously clever and clumsy. If something is in any way stimulating, worth thinking about, I prefer to respond and comment in the mode of probing curiosity, of absurd generosity. To approach what to you is strange, and to forge it into something stranger still.

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Ways In and Ways Out of the Situationist Labyrinth

Alejandro de Acosta

2011, November

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“Voice 1: *Howls for Sade*, a film by Guy-Ernest Debord.

Voice 2: *Howls for Sade* is dedicated to Gil J Wolman.”

– opening of Debord’s *Howls for Sade*

1

(On a street corner, then running down the street)

Old Alciphron: Sorry I’m late. I’m always late to these things!

Young Alciphron: Don’t worry, older one. I’m the only one here. Everyone else is at that Occupy thing...

OA: ... which didn’t tempt you enough, younger one?

YA: ...

OA: Anyway, before all that, we were to meet here to talk about the book by McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street*.

YA: Titles that recycle slogans: always a bad idea. But I am ready.

OA: As am I, with this sheaf of notes and this annotated copy. Let’s start walking. This way. Well, the first version of the book had a much more interesting title: *50 Years of Recuperation of the Situationist International*.

YA: Much better. But look, I am impatient (though I pretend not to be when I speak with you). Why either one? Why another book on the SI?

OA: Do we know them? From the point of view of our language, the first phase of translation, rendering the texts into English, is more or less accomplished. The majority of Situationist writings have been compiled, many or most images reproduced. There are several archives that collect much of the material, adding commentary and context; there are academic and non-academic anthologies.

YA: You are suggesting that translation in other senses, the second, third, *n*th phases, is unstable and ongoing?

OA: Yes. What used to be called interpretation. Look, there have been decades of Situationist-inspired projects, so much so that for some of us some version of the SI is a basic point of reference. But for others, these many entryways are not automatically ways in. An anthology or an archive, so it seems to me, is not a way in; one needs a reason, and the reason itself needs a desire. Faster.

YA: Run together desire-reason-need to find a way in, passing through the entryway?

OA: Yes – faster, let’s run, arm in arm – if one is like you, the first-timer – idealized or not – or like me, when I become capable of reading these texts anew, studying these images afresh ...

YA: So the desire-reason-need complex will eventually show the path one takes through the labyrinth ... where are we going?

OA: For some of us our projects were the crystallization of that desire, the mark of our interest, our entry into dialogue with others (and, though many of us did not suspect it, with tradition. For example, it was one way to learn to speak Marxish and Hegelese).

YA: This goes for all of us, the idealized (or not) first-timer and the rest: we want a translation into a language of our own ...

OA: ... so that the figures who appear in a book can come to seem like our friends, and vice versa ...

YA: ... so that the theoretical terms that pepper it can be analogous, often enough, to the ones we use.

OA: Indeed, I would underline that the use of situationist terms (spectacle, situation, *dérive*, psychogeography, etc.) decades later and in other places cannot but have something of analogy about it.

YA: I imagine there are more analogies to come. The issue in this sort of translation is not one of exactitude, but of metamorphosis. We like what seems off in these terms and people when they mutate what is static in our lives. But that is a condition *we* set according to *our* desires.

OA: Have I answered your question as to why one might read a book like this?

YA: More or less. At least its appearance is a good occasion to stage such questions, because it is in some ways an introduction (corresponding to the latter phases of translation), and in other ways betrays that function.

OA: Museum, and hole in the museum's wall. Stop here.

2

(At the gate of the labyrinth)

YA: Here – you mean this labyrinth?

OA: Well, at its gate. The way in, maybe the way out as well.

YA: You can begin by explaining this to me: museum, and hole in the museum's wall?

OA: Caress the stone of the gate as I do. An article in *Internationale Situationniste* 4 had the title *Die welt als Labyrinth*: a description for an exhibition that would lead from a museum to the streets in convoluted paths. Let me read a bit to you: “it is not desirable to build the labyrinth in the museum of a certain German town which is unsuitable to the *dérive*. Furthermore, the very fact of utilizing a museum brings with it a particular pressure, and the west face of the Amsterdam labyrinth was a wall specially constructed in the guise of an entrance to breach this: that hole in the wall had been requested by our German section as a guarantee of non-submission to the logic of the museum. The S.I. has also adopted, in April, a plan by Wyckaert profoundly modifying the use of the labyrinth studied for Amsterdam. The labyrinth shall not be built inside another building but, with greater flexibility and in direct relation to urban realities, on well-situated wasteland in a selected city, so as to become the setting off point for *dérives*.”

YA: I see. The labyrinth is their time...

OA: ... and so we return to Wark's better title. The reference to recuperation would seem to be an irreverent gesture rather than an angry complaint. A shrug in the face of the purists of the group.

YA: Of the idea of the group, the SI, or any group ... suggesting the inevitability of recuperation, which could be the way things are at this turn of the labyrinth ...

OA: ... or, more speculatively, a spectacular version of some quite ordinary aspect of culture. I mean a glimpse of that aspect of culture that expresses our studied cruelty to the cultures of others – which can be linked with the '68 graffiti *soyons cruels!* or Nietzsche's *be cruel with your past and all who would keep you there* ... wait, was that Nietzsche?

YA: How would I know, both hands on this stone? Anyway, this would not mean that there is no important distinction between recuperation and whatever we would face off against it,

creating situations, for example, but it does mean that, from the point of view of culture as cruelty, or at least from that of the current inevitability of recuperation, there is not much urgency in distinguishing between good and bad Situationist ideas ...

OA: ... or people. And that lack of urgency, its irreverence, is a good way to describe Wark's style: though he plays the academic game well enough, he does so with a certain lack of seriousness that, in his terms, consistently allows him to set aside the concepts (and proper names!) of high theory in favor of the incomplete ramblings and failed projects of what he calls low theory.

YA: You are going to have to explain that business of high and low theory to me.

OA: Take your hands off the stone, younger one; let us step back and gaze upon the gate. Probably the terminology arises through the twin demands of the academic market and the crude pragmatism of those we could call practitioners (activists or artists, for example). If I am right about this, high theory would be whatever intellectual mode can claim some mixture of prestige and in-fashion status in the academic world at the moment, along with the canon this mode suggests.

YA: One could say so much more about this! Where such theory comes from geographically and where it doesn't, its emphasis on proper names and adjectives formed from them, who publishes it, etc. – not to mention how anyone arrived at the idea of "theory" at all...

OA: Sure, but let's remain in his schema for now. Low theory could then be either the popularization of high theory in increasingly diluted, applied forms; or, more interestingly, it could be something else entirely, a way of theorizing that not only fails to be high theory, but does not attempt to qualify as such.

YA: Outsider theory, street theory; non-academic, or at least not primarily academic.

OA: Also, if this is to be an interesting idea, not necessarily popular theory; not necessarily theory aimed at the imaginary masses, the ideal everyman, the ghostly everywoman...

YA: According to this schema, most if not all of the theoretical works produced by anarchists (and situationists, supposing there are any) today would have to be classed as low theory.

OA: Naturally, no? This is especially interesting when we consider how many of these works propose a way of thinking and living that is to some degree impossible.

YA: Yes, and how that impossibility, rather than being solely a source of frustration for writers and readers, acts as something more on the order of an intimate, vital challenge, a lure for feeling.

OA: A challenge of this sort could be Wark's desire...

YA: For that to be clear, we would have to know who Wark is addressing in this book. For my part, I am not sure. I am not sure he is sure.

OA: Yes, that is why I have to invent ideal first-time readers for him.

YA: Well, if I follow what you said a minute ago, he certainly develops Situationist terms and concepts in a satisfyingly *low* way, by which I mean: not enough of a definition to satisfy a theorist; enough to get a creative mind going in an interesting direction.

OA: Or, enough not to have read a thousand books before "putting ideas into practice," as they say, though this schema of reading-and-then-acting is silly indeed...

YA: Low theory would have to sabotage that schema, or result from its sabotage. Let's come back to theory and its terms on the other side. We are still in need of a way in. What about Situationist people (since we won't have the problem of wondering whether people can be put into practice)?

OA: The last time I reviewed a book on the Situationists, one of a spate of academic books that have appeared in the last decade or so, I inserted this remark in passing: "Many commentators on

the SI either hallucinate themselves into the decades-old fray of expulsions and corrections, or they pull away into an abstract and scholarly safety zone.” In Wark’s favor, I can say that he does neither of these. I continued: “Could it be that this split is an effect of the continual centering of Guy Debord as originator, founding genius, even Bretonian ‘pope’ evidenced in this anthology (from its title on), a certain ‘Debordism’ diagnosed by Luther Blissett with all of the spite reserved by situationists for nouns with that suffix?”

YA: So in placing (for you, unexpected) emphasis on everyone-but-Debord, some of them so-called minor figures, and their versions of the Situationist project...

OA: ... Wark dismisses the purists of the SI by writing as if there was never really one group. Listen to this bit: “One discovers in the first three years of the SI many potential versions of it”...

YA: ... and later too. It is hard to find the story of Debord as pope here. He is rather a secretary, writing letters to and about practically everybody.

OA: I noted that, although he does not place Debord at the center of his narrative, Wark does not criticize him for the practice of exclusion, which would be, for some, evidence for his own sense of centrality.

YA: It is a qualified explanation. Writing that he does not think there was one SI changes the status of exclusions.

OA: Listen to this part: “Situationists were expected to know what was expected of them and without being told. Debord’s policy as secretary was ‘to place a priori confidence, in all cases, and only until the first proof to the contrary, in a certain number of recognized comrades, based upon objective criteria.’ The reason for most exclusions is not mysterious. It was a failure to live up to expectations. Members are what they do: ‘No problem in our collective action can be resolved by good will.’ A certain unsentimental understanding of how friendships form and dissolve, of how character becomes different to itself as it struggles in and against time underlie the distinctive quality of Situationist subjectivity, where ‘neither freedom nor intelligence are given once and for all.’” Repeat: in Debord’s SI, exclusion was perhaps related more to a *certain understanding of friendship* than to the leftover habits of communist parties and groupuscules it is usually connected to by commentators.

YA: I would rather not be friends with someone that places his friends in such double binds!

OA: Your preferences or mine aside, what could be more common? Driven, intense people are often this way – nothing “sinister” about it, as Wark puts it. For a party in power, or seeking power, to exclude is indeed sinister. For a group such as the Situationist International (or some version thereof) to do so is another matter entirely. Wark aptly calls them “a provisional micro-society”: something between a political group and a band of friends.

YA: An affinity group? People are always explaining how they come together and how they stay together, not how they are disassembled or fall apart ...

OA: In any case, some people make friends for life, and others don’t; some friendships end well, and others end badly; and to the degree that some of that is done freely, I prefer to understand this as one of the many uses of freedom in friendship, rather than encroaching on them, even by criticism.

YA: So that would be one example of the openness of Wark’s irreverent approach.

OA: Yes. It is ultimately pleasant to think that this might be a sign that there are now many ways into learning from the Situationists. For example, in decentering Debord, Wark also revokes the status of *Society of the Spectacle* as the defining text of Situationist theory. I consider it a good thing that people might now begin with something other than *Society of the Spectacle*. For all its

interest, this attempt to give the movement a theory text (or to invent a movement by writing one, in classic socialist/communist fashion) is done at the cost of the expulsion of the idea of situation, probably so as to give center stage to the by now clearly dubious political proposal of worker's councils.

YA: So you are celebrating the decentering of this book? I haven't read it yet.

OA: Decentered, it will be better reading. Past decentering it, those of us who have learned something from it, and some irresponsible others, will have to rewrite it one day without the dialectic and in a way that renders the worker's councils a local solution (Council-bolos?) and restores the construction of situations to its more critical place. Otherwise generation after generation will continue to get mired in the crudest dualism of appearance and reality ... separation realized ...

YA: What about the other one I always hear about, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*?

OA: Well, Vaneigem barely appears in *The Beach*. It is less clear why – probably, whereas *Society of the Spectacle* has too much of a high theory agenda, *Revolution* sets too much of a unilateral tone. You know, the younger generations ... whatever one ultimately makes of these decenterings, they are also ways to undo some of the binds and knots that we have inherited from the Situationists and their interpreters.

YA: I think it is the nightmare of some to consider that they come together with their interpreters.

OA: Ha! 50 years of recuperation!

YA: ... better than fifty years of introduction, half a century of getting ready to live...

OA: ... in some sense even the little betrayal that is in irreverence can be a way out for which we will be grateful should the labyrinth grow tiresome.

YA: But now I am imagining two labyrinths: their time, and ours.

OA: Which suggests that we are ready to pass inside. Let's be silent for a while.

3

(Some time later, inside the labyrinth)

YA: It is very dark in here.

OA: What have you been thinking about in the dark, younger one?

YA: Proper names...

OA: ... these others, strange friends...

YA: Wark devotes the bulk of *The Beach* to discussions of everyone-but-Debord. But one could also say that the first marginal situationist in Wark's book is ... Guy Debord.

OA: Before appearing as the secretary, he shows up in the days of Lettrism as a "street ethnographer" interested in the life of non-working people – hanging out with dropouts and delinquents. I remember this line: "Debord was researching a people who were neither bourgeois nor proletarian nor bohemian, and decidedly not middle class."

YA: In their company, before there was a group, or before the group had a name, ideas and experiences were exchanged, friendships and enmities bloomed.

OA: And love affairs.

YA: And that togetherness is something other than politics or community.

OA: [Sigh]

YA: In this street research we might have learned the stakes in sticking together as gangs do. As Ralph Rumney said: "Our social exclusion made us a close group."

OA: And love affairs? Wark describes Michèle Bernstein's novels *All the King's Horses* and *The Night* as *détournements* of F. Sagan and A. Robbe-Grillet, then-popular novelists, and at the same time versions of her relationships with Debord and others. Love triangles, and so on.

YA: Gangs ... different sorts of knots and binds?

OA: Wark makes this an opportunity to briefly broach the subject of sexual politics, and maybe there is something here to meditate on: when the inevitably narcissistic novel of one's life, that novel we are all involuntarily writing about ourselves, is to be written out, it might be desirable to take a detour through the spectacular presentation of another's life.

YA: For me, that there were *two* novels based on the same events is perhaps the remarkable, rebellious point in all that.

OA: Rebellious writing? What about Alexander Trocchi's collective writing project, *sigma portfolio*?

YA: Its outcome was certainly something other than a novel: an "interpersonal log. It is to be an open-ended series of simple typed and duplicated documents."

OA: In Trocchi's own words: "This gambit, a round-robin which includes *n* participants, an interpersonal experiment in expression; a man responding as and when he pleases; copies of his response at once roneo-ed for circulation; individuals chiming in, checking out at any time."

YA: What is roneo-ed?

OA: I don't know either. Some kind of duplication, ditto machine.

YA: Predictably, Wark gets excited about *sigma* and describes it as "a web of logs before there was even an internet."

OA: More interestingly, here is Trocchi again: "we propose immediate action on the international scale, a self-governing (non-)organization of producers of the new culture beyond, and independent of, all political organizations..."

YA: You have certainly memorized a lot of this book!

OA: No, I have a small light with me, and my annotated copy. You didn't notice because I am walking behind you. I want to talk about Asger Jorn, which is going to require some lengthy quotes. Close your eyes and re-enter the dark of the labyrinth. First, concerning a recent object of some controversy, the fact that he continued to fund the Situationists after his exit, he said: "my interest in the situationist movement is purely personal and passionate, in a direct fashion, and, if the inevitable developments of social circumstances necessitate my exclusion from the movement this changes absolutely nothing in my purely economic attitude towards this movement. The economic surplus that my social situation, insofar as I am a painter, gives me is best placed with the situationist movement, even if this movement is obliged to attack me for being in a situation from which I can't escape, but which embarrasses the movement."

YA: An appropriate complement to your earlier statements about friendship and exclusion. But I thought that, overall, the discussion of Asger Jorn's theoretical contributions in *The Beach* is confused.

OA: Perhaps Jorn, the "amateur Marxist," was confusing. One can get at least a sense of the primacy of aesthetic over scientific considerations for him. Take his flirtation with one of the most

obtuse works in the Marxist canon, Engels' *Anti-Dühring*: "It is Engels who leads Jorn down the slippery slope of a dialectics of nature, and like Engels he risks a somewhat vapid generalization of certain figures from scientific literature ... But what distinguishes Jorn from Engels is not just that his readings in scientific literature are more contemporary; they are readings of a different kind. Jorn does not aspire to a materialist world view, as Engels did, but a materialist attitude to life. He wants not a metaphysics legitimized by science but a pataphysics that reads science creatively. Rather than imitate scientific writing, Jorn – like Alfred Jarry – appropriates from scientific writing according to his own desires."

YA: It seems to me that the bulk of Wark's case for low theory rests on what he says about Jorn.

OA: It is almost inevitable that he faces off Jorn (not Debord!) vs. Althusser in the name of low theory. "Jorn's amateur Marxist theories from the 1940s and early '50s went largely unpublished at the time and received scant attention. The most influential appropriation of Marxist thought would not be Sartre's but that of Jorn's contemporary Louis Althusser. They could hardly be more different. Althusser spent the war in a POW camp, not the Resistance. Althusser's thought was in Jorn's terms clearly that of a materialist world view. It took science rather than aesthetic practice as its model. Althusser stayed within the Communist Party (with Maoist sympathies) rather than break with it. He made Marxism respectable within the space of the academy, rather than attempting to found a new nexus between theory and practice outside of it. Althusser was much more interested in history as objective process than as subjective practice. Where Althusser became a respected academic philosopher, Jorn's academic advisor gently suggested that his thesis was not really the sort of thing that could even be submitted."

YA: Why all these lengthy quotes for this guy?

OA: Be patient. Low theory can be long-winded too. "Jorn points towards the question of practice, outside of, and now after the eclipse of, both the Communist and bourgeois versions of history. If Althusser cements a place within the academy for developing Marxism as a critical postwar discourse, he does so at the expense of aligning it with high theory. Marx is absorbed into the conventions of academic thought, into its spaces of authority, its codes of discipline, its temporality of semesters and sabbaticals. Jorn offers something in addition to all that. His is a development of Marx as a critical postwar discourse that creates its own games, makes its own rules, answers to a quite different time, and belongs to a more marginal but more interesting space, the space not of an institution but of a provisional micro-society, within which the practice of thought might be otherwise."

YA: Hmmm. All of this will take some rumination. Wark assumes we have a stake in the outcome of Marxism. You might; I don't.

OA: But there are analogies to be made with anarchist theory as it exists and to come, no? Think it over. Also, as with the two novels, it's not trivial that he made such bizarre paintings while writing all this stuff. We'll talk about it later when you've had a chance to see them in good lighting. Constant?

YA: Much more appropriate for this dark enclosure. From the early researches on urbanism to the New Babylon project, he seems to have had an influence, or at least his own take, on the construction of situations. He proposed a dynamic urbanism of movable, I almost want to say poseable buildings. The psychological effects of an environment upon a person or group are quite limited if buildings are heavy and static ...

OA: So set people *and* buildings into motion: “Owning property affords someone a house in which to be at home, at the price of being homeless in the world. Dispense with property, dispense with separation, and the feeling of being merely thrown into the world goes with them. Our species-being can give vent to its wanderlust, at home in a house-like world. Constant thought modernity was already accelerating a return to a nomadic existence. New Babylon is nomadic life fully realized.”

YA: Architecture set in motion, pliable architecture, allows the events of life, no longer mere psychological effects, to be primary!

OA: Dynamism seems to make us raise our voices! Jacqueline de Jong?

YA: She appears most dramatically with the Second Situationist International, “a rival and a replacement” for what was, for them, the “First” SI. Their journal, *Situationist Times*, was an alternative to *Internationale Situationniste*. In their founding document, one can read: “now everyone is free to become a Situationist without the need for special formalities.” I loved that.

OA: So maybe you have an opinion on this matter of exclusions as well?

YA: No, that is their business. But I prefer to do things without special formalities.

OA: De Jong writes in a letter to Debord: “The Situationist International has to be considered either as an avant-garde school which has already produced a series of first-class artists thrown out after having passed through their education OR as an anti-organization based upon new ideology which is situationist and which has not yet found in details its clear formulations in the fields of science, technique, and art.” The anti-organization does not practice exclusion, but rather allows an uncontrolled inclusion: “everybody who develops theoretically or practically this new unity is automatically a member of the situationist international and in this perspective the *Situationist Times*.”

YA: Well, we could have inherited this schizo version instead of the paranoiac pro-Situ, post-Situ, etc. arrangements that respected the central and centralizing version...

OA: Schizo, that reminds me ... Chtcheglov?

YA: Almost not mentioned at all! I will remember Chtcheglov with a line from outside Wark’s book. Poor Chtcheglov! He was bored in the city. In Olympia I found a book of poems about him. Here is the best line: “The moon rises above the State.”

OA: Our dialogue is lunar, no? I believe we have found our way to one of the exits.

YA: Let us pass through the hole in the wall, older one.

OA: On the other side, we might speak about some situationist terms before parting ways ... these words that needed, perhaps still need definition...

4

(Outside the labyrinth, on another street, maybe the same street)

YA: It is bright here, or at least brighter. And I am the one who asks the questions now, older one! You are the one who knows something about these terms that are more concrete than ideas, less precise than concepts, and I want to see what news you learned in this book of Wark’s. My list is short. *Decomposition*?

OA: It might be helpful to compare the definitions from *Internationale Situationniste* 1. Here is the one for decomposition: “The process in which traditional cultural forms have destroyed themselves as a result of the emergence of superior means of controlling nature which make possible and necessary superior cultural constructions. We can distinguish between the active phase of the decomposition and effective demolition of the old superstructures – which came to an end around 1930 – and a phase of repetition that has prevailed since that time. The delay in the transition from decomposition to new constructions is linked to the delay in the revolutionary liquidation of capitalism.” Wark broadens the context for understanding this idea, presenting decomposition in and as the passage from a technique of avant-garde art to a critique of modern life: taking things apart until we notice that things are falling apart ...

YA: ... or as we notice things are falling apart. And then still taking things apart, but in other ways and for other reasons.

OA: One source is Isidore Isou: “When most people thought of the postwar years as a time of reconstruction, Isou wanted to push the destruction of culture still further. His trans-historical theory of culture took the will to create as its primary axiom. Not Marxist necessity, not Sartrean freedom, but creation is the highest form of human activity. Creation takes us from the spit of unconsciousness to the eternity of a consciously created history, for while the artist creates within history, the act of creation touches the eternal. All forms – aesthetic and social – move from a stage of amplification to one of decomposition. In the amplification stage, a form grows to incorporate whole aspects of existence. The amplified form shapes life and makes it meaningful. In the period of decomposition, forms turn on themselves, become self-referential. Forms fall from grace and from history. As the form decomposes, so does the life to which it once gave shape. Form becomes unreal; language becomes tame: ‘Tarzan learns in his father’s book to call tigers cats.’”

YA: But somehow the situationist can get into decomposition and operate within it, push it farther? Tiger cats are not just sad, they are also funny. They are dialectically reversible to cat tigers, mini-tigers, suggesting the power of the small and the weak ... Yes, I see. This decomposition was to be pursued “to the limit.” I like that. *Dérive*?

OA: From the journal: “A mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances.” Wark supplements this with the memory of your friend Chtcheglov, his part in the invention of street ethnography; this wandering or drifting around urban spaces could be understood more precisely as a discovery of lived time. This is time devoted neither to work nor to leisure. The time of the non-working classes.

YA: The time of research ... of low theory. *Situation*?

OA: Well, you know, “A moment of life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary ambience and a game of events.” As you might have heard, part of the polemical function of this definition is to replace the concept of the artwork as commodity. But Wark suggests that in the background of the polemic there is also an engagement with the idea of freedom. He helpfully contrasts Sartre’s use of the term situation: “Sartre ... famously makes the category of freedom a central one, but in so doing [has] a sly recourse also to the category of situation. That which is for-itself, consciousness, presupposes something external to it. ‘There can be a free for-itself only in a resisting world.’ It is because of the intractable physicality of things that freedom arises as freedom.” But the situation as defined above does not distinguish between consciousness and what is external to it.

YA: Which perhaps explains the attraction of the adjective *unitary* for some of these folks.

OA: To construct freedom, construct situations: micro-worlds, provisional micro-societies, in which the obstacle and what it blocks are simultaneously transformed.

YA: I am thinking of Constant, again ...

OA: It is a telling aspect of situation as a low-theoretical term that it includes a hidden reference to, and correction of previous high-theoretical concepts of, the supremely recuperable idea of freedom. And?

YA: ... I almost don't want to bother, given what you've said so far. There's plenty to get going with ...

OA: So ...

YA: Oh, what the hell. Spectacle?

OA: The term is not defined in the initial list in *Internationale Situationniste* and was later overdefined...

YA: ... Debord aiming in *Society of the Spectacle* at a concept worthy of high theory, so you have suggested.

OA: Wark somewhat perversely amuses himself by discussing it not through Debord's opus, as social relation mediated by images or materialized worldview or topsy-turvy world but through the work of his sometimes friend, sometimes enemy, the sociologist Lefebvre. For Lefebvre it is "the great pleonasm, the Thing of Things." As though the term was already saturated with meaning at the beginning – as though the books that speak of it (Lefebvre's *and* Debord's) are also pleonastic ... The definition of the spectacle and the spectacle of definition: schema for high theory. Wark allows us to consider this sociological appropriation of what was hardly intended as a sociological concept as a moment of 50 years of recuperation...

YA ... this term, so it would seem, has a different status.

OA: The first three already belong to low theory. Almost no one cares about them. This last one will have to be re-appropriated if it is to be of use.

YA: As long as re-appropriated does not suggest the mastery that is high theory's concern. I think rather of setting it adrift, along with all the others.

OA: Wark says: "Low theory returns in moments, not of disappointment, but of boredom. We are bored with these burnt offerings, these warmed-up leftovers. High theory cedes too much to the existing organization of knowledge and art. It is nothing more than the spectacle of disintegration extending into knowledge itself. Rather a negative theory that reveals the gap between this world and its promises. Rather a negative action which reveals the gap between what can be done and what is to be done."

YA: But is all low theory negative theory? We need to think this through, work through the permutations ... we need *spaces* in which to do this ...

OA: "For such experiments the Situationist legacy stands ripe for a *détournement* that has no respect for those who claim proprietary rights over it."

YA: Rights: the museum. Experiments: the hole in the museum's wall. Where else?

OA: Though one is often housed inside the other, "The archive too is a space for *dérive*."

YA: The city and the archive ... well-positioned wastelands, they said. But they are dead. Who is there now, in the *dérive*?

OA: In some exemplary and dangerous sense, we are. In another sense, we only find a mask, that of translator or researcher of low theory. In a third sense, no one is there.

YA: What am I supposed to do with that answer? I am going back into the labyrinth. I want to see if the way in is also a way out. Wherever I come out, I guess I'll go visit the Occupy thing after all. But I am going to be late.

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Alejandro de Acosta
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